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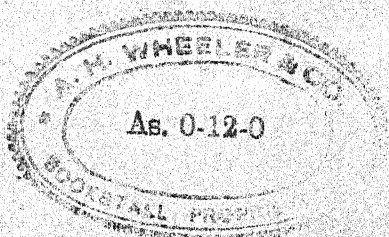
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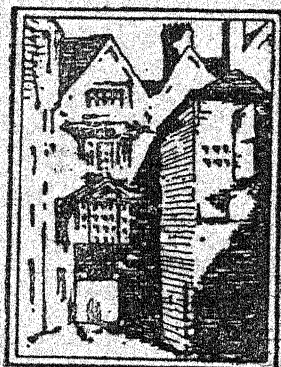
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THE LOST MR. LINTHWAITE

BY J. S. FLETCHER



47



HODDER & STOUGHTON
LIMITED - LONDON

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THE LOST MR. LINTHWAITE

CHAPTER I

BY WORD OF MOUTH

FLEET STREET, at four o'clock that springtide afternoon, was at its busiest. The most eminent of the recently deposed European Sovereigns, emulating the example of Napoleon Bonaparte, had broken loose from his place of exile, made a dramatic reappearance in his former capital that morning, and was rallying round him his old adherents to the confusion of a new Government and the anger of both hemispheres.

The London evening papers were hurrying out edition after edition with the latest tidings from the scene of action. Newspaper carts were starting out to all points of the compass; newspaper boys were risking their limbs among the wheeled traffic; at every corner of street and alley men were turning over the damp sheets in haste to catch some idea of the latest freak of the man who was still a danger and a menace.

From the end of Fetter Lane to the middle of Ludgate Circus there was an unusual accentuation of noise and bustle, and to a girl who came into the street in a taxicab from the direction of London Bridge it seemed as if she were suddenly plunged into a crystallised quintessence of all the racket of the world.

The taxicab driver pulled up in front of a palatial building, got down, and, opening the door of his vehicle, looked at his fare as a man looks who is about to impart information which, he is quite certain, is being imparted to its recipient for the first time.

"Morning Sentinel office, miss," he said.

The girl dropped a two-shilling piece into the outstretched hand, and hurried into the doorway. A grey-moustached commissioner, presiding over a group of boys, sized up her timidity and inexperience, and advanced as she entered.

"Yes, miss?" he asked. "Want to see somebody?"

The girl held out a sheet of letter-paper and pointed to the signature.

"Can I see Mr. Richard Brixey?" she asked.

"Mr. Brixey, miss? Certainly—I believe he's in just now," answered the commissioner. He picked up a sheaf of callers' forms and handed the girl a pencil. "If you'll just fill that up, miss, and then take a seat in the waiting-room."

The girl took the form and quickly understood its meaning. Without delay she handed it back, filled up, and the commissioner glanced it over:

Caller's Name	-	-	-	-	-	Miss Georgina Byfield.
Caller's Address	-	-	-	-	-	The Mitre, Selchester.
To See	-	-	-	-	-	Mr. Richard Brixey.
Business	-	-	-	-	-	About Mr. John Linthwaite.

"Stubbins!" said the commissioner.

A boy detached himself from half-a-dozen who lounged on a bench, took the slip of paper, vanished into an elevator, was whirled upwards, and disappeared; the girl, motioned thereto by the commissionaire, walked into a waiting-room and sat down. But she had only had time to realise that there was a map of London on one wall and a large photograph of the proprietor of the *Morning Sentinel* on another, when Stubbins shot into view again, and beckoned to her as only an absolutely unconcerned youth can beckon.

Next moment she found herself being swiftly borne into high regions; a moment later she was traversing a long corridor; then Stubbins flung open a door and motioned her to go in as a warder might motion a prisoner to enter a cell. The corridor was gloomy, the room bright; she was conscious at first of nothing but the fact that a man was there, alone, and that he came hurriedly forward.

But the next instant, as the door closed behind her, she saw that this was a young man, who looked, indeed, much more youthful than he probably was. He was a shortish, athletic-looking young man, with broad shoulders and an air of activity—a pink-faced, blue-eyed, red-haired person, clean-shaven; by no means handsome, for he owned a snub nose and many freckles, but suggestive of much mental ability and general alertness.

He wore a new suit of rather loud-patterned tweeds, and a club tie of pronounced colours; a green Homburg hat was tilted back off his red hair, and in his anxiety he forgot to remove it—he was so anxious, indeed, that without any ceremony he instantly pointed to the name which Miss Georgina Byfield had written down at the foot of the form.

"What's this?" he demanded, as he hurried forward. "That's my uncle's name? What do you know about him? I see you're from Selchester. Is—is he ill?"

He was taking in all that he could about his caller as he spoke. She was about his own height—a girl, he decided, of twenty or twenty-one, brown-haired, brown-eyed, pleasing rather than strictly pretty, quietly but well-dressed; a superior sort of girl, he thought. And he suddenly pulled forward a chair, and at the same moment snatched off his hat.

"It's difficult to explain," answered Miss Byfield. "I don't know anything—except what I've been sent to tell you."

"And that," he broke in eagerly, "That's—what?"

"Mr. Brackett, of the Mitre Hotel, at Selchester, sent me," replied Miss Byfield. "I am bookkeeper there. Mr. John Linthwaite came to the hotel three days ago—that was on Monday. But since Tuesday morning nothing has been seen of him, either at the hotel or in the town. He's disappeared."

Brixey, who was standing with his hands plunged deep in his pockets, staring at his visitor, screwed up his lips as if to whistle. But before the sound came he twisted round, dropped into the chair behind his desk, and became business-like.

"Just tell me all about it," he said. "Disappeared! Why, I was to meet him at Winchester to-morrow morning! The fact is"—he pointed to a suit-case which stood on a chair close by—"I was going down there to-night; I was just off when you sent up your name. But—tell me."

Miss Georgina Byfield was slowly considering the structure of her story. She had rehearsed it more than once on her way to London and the *Morning Sentinel* office, but now that she was in the presence of the person she had been sent to find, it seemed to her that it was no easy matter to tell even the plainest of tales. And Brixey saw her diffidence, and hastened to help.

"Just begin at the beginning," he said, with an understanding smile. "The beginning—that's always best. Then we know where we are."

Miss Byfield, who had been thoughtfully regarding him, nodded.

"Well," she said, "it began on Monday evening, then. A gentleman—a stranger—came in and booked a room at the Mitre, just before dinner-time, and said he'd want it until Friday morning. He signed the register as Mr. John Linthwaite, London—no other address. I believe he told Mr. Brackett, the landlord, that evening, that he had come to Selchester to look round the old places—the cathedral, and the Priory, and the city walls, and so on. Next morning, soon after breakfast, he went out, and we've never seen him since."

"That was Tuesday morning?" asked Brixey.

Miss Byfield nodded.

"And now," said Brixey, "it's Thursday afternoon. So he's been missing from your place two days. And two nights."

"Yes," she assented. "Two days and two nights."

"Wasn't Mr. Brackett alarmed when Mr. Linthwaite didn't return on Tuesday night?" asked Brixey.

"Mr. Brackett thought that he had possibly met some friend who lived in the neighbourhood and had gone home with him for the night," answered Miss Byfield. "But when no message came, and he didn't return again last night, nor send any word—well, then he began to get uneasy, because he thought that Mr. Linthwaite, in looking about him, might have met with some accident."

"For instance, behind the Priory—which he'd spoken of going to see—there's a large sheet of water, in a very lonely place, and—well, Mr. Brackett thought, you know, that——"

"That possibly he'd fallen into it," said Brixey. "Just so. And how did you hear of me?"

Miss Byfield held out the letter which she had produced to the taxicab driver.

"This morning, first thing," she replied, "Mr. Brackett looked round No. 7—Mr. Linthwaite's room—to see if he could get any clue to his address. He couldn't find anything but this—it was lying on the dressing-table. He and I read it. And we gathered, of course, that Mr. Linthwaite was your uncle and that you were to meet him at Winchester to-morrow——"

"Just so!" said Brixey. "I was! I'm just beginning my holiday; he and I were to meet at Winchester and go on through the south and south-west of England together. But—I interrupted you."

"So Mr. Brackett told me to catch the noon express to London Bridge and come straight here to tell you," concluded Miss Byfield. "He thought it would be better than wiring."

"Very good of him, and kind of you," said Brixey. "But—this is a queer affair! Mr. Linthwaite, as I've said, is my uncle, and I know

him and his habits exceedingly well, for he and I, both being bachelors, have lived together in chambers in the Temple for some years. He's a most punctilious, methodical man, and after booking a room at your hotel he certainly wouldn't absent himself without letting you know. So—something's happened. You heard nothing of him in Selchester?"

"Nothing?" replied Miss Byfield.

"And has Mr. Brackett made no inquiries?" asked Brixey.

"You see, we thought he would be coming back every minute," explained Miss Byfield. "Mr. Brackett didn't know what to do, and he didn't like to go to the police about it. But he had some hopes that you, perhaps, had heard from Mr. Linthwaite."

"Heard nothing," said Brixey. He picked up a railway guide, and hastily turned to one of its pages. "Did you come straight to this office from London Bridge, Miss Byfield?" he asked. "You did? Then, you've had no tea? Very well—we've just got an hour to get some and to catch the 5.45 to Selchester. Sorry to hustle you, but I reckon I must get straight down there and take a look round for my uncle; he's got to be found. So——"

He seized his suit-case as he spoke, flung the green Homburg on the back of his red hair, threw an overcoat over his left shoulder, and hurried Miss Byfield away to the lift. Two minutes more and she was again in a taxicab and in the roar of Fleet Street, and Brixey, sitting at her side, was looking as if all the noise was a million miles away.

CHAPTER II

THE ONLY CLUE

FOUR hours later, as the dusk of the May evening settled into night, Brixey found himself in an old-fashioned omnibus which two ancient horses drew clumsily over the cobble-paved street of a quiet town. Looking out through the narrow windows, he was aware of old, high-gabled houses, of a tall spire rising high above trees, and of a general air of antiquity.

The omnibus turned a corner into a wider street, rumbled under an archway, and came to a stand; and Brixey, assisting his companion to alight, found himself in a queer old courtyard, flanked on either side by picturesque bow windows, through the red curtains of which shone a warm and cheery glow. A waiter and a chambermaid appeared at a door and seized on Brixey's belongings; behind them came a tall, sturdy old man, white-bearded, rosy-cheeked, who hurried out with evident anxiety.

"This is Mr. Brackett," said Miss Byfield.

Brixey held out a hand to the landlord, who took it with old-fashioned politeness.

"Your servant, sir," he said hurriedly. "Glad you've come down, sir. But have you any news of this poor gentleman?"

Brixey shook his head.

"Have you?" he asked. "That's the most important point."

"Come this way, sir," said the landlord. He led Brixey into the

house, across a shadowy old hall, and into a cosy parlour where a bright fire of logs burned on the hearth.

"This is the sitting-room I gave Mr. Linthwaite," he said, as they entered. "There's some of the papers and books he was reading the night he came in. No, sir, I've no news. After I sent up to you this morning, I just gave a quiet hint to the police, and they've been making inquiries round the town, but up to an hour ago they'd heard nothing. Nobody seems to have even seen the poor gentleman since he walked out of here on Tuesday morning."

Brixey took off his hat and gloves and laid them aside.

"Very well," he said. "Then I've just got to find him, Mr. Brackett. So let me have some supper in here, and book me a room, and in the meantime show me the room he had and what he left there."

He presently followed the landlord up an old-fashioned, heavily-balustered staircase, and along a succession of winding corridors. From habit and training Brixey kept his eyes active, and as he went along he made note of old pictures, cabinets of glass and china and silver, ancient furniture, and the various oddments that accumulate in old houses; he noted, too, the unevenness of the floors which he trod, and the queer angles and nooks wherein doors were set.

"An old place this," he observed, as the landlord stopped at a door. "Very old indeed, I should think."

"Goes back to old Harry the Eighth, sir, some of it," answered Brackett. "It's been in my family's hands since Queen Anne's times. One Stephen Brackett after another has held it ever since then—I'm the seventh in a straight line. It used to be a famous coaching house in the old days, but now—well, we get a few motorists for an hour or two. The old times, sir, are gone. This is the room Mr. Linthwaite had."

He ushered Brixey into a roomy, comfortable apartment, and lighted a couple of candles which stood in tall plated sticks on the dressing-table.

"All's just as he left it on Tuesday," he continued. "I made bold to look through his things first thing this morning, to see if I could find any address, otherwise nothing's been touched."

There was little to see or to examine. An old-fashioned portmanteau lay open on a stand; some garments were hanging on pegs; various toilet articles lay about; a book or two lay on a table near the bed.

"If I hadn't found your letter lying open there on the dressing-table, sir," said Brackett, "I shouldn't have known what to do. You see, Mr. Linthwaite didn't enter any address of his own when he came—just London, and no more. I suppose you've no theory of your own, sir?"

"None!" answered Brixey. "And so I must get to work. I'll have that bit of supper, Mr. Brackett, and then, late as it is, I must see your police. My own idea is that my uncle's met with some accident. Your young lady mentioned some sheet of water that you thought he might have fallen into."

"I suggested that to Inspector Crabbe this afternoon," said Brackett. "He promised to have that water looked at, and I expect him in before the evening's over. I'll give you the next room to this, sir, if you'll come this way, and you shall have some hot supper in ten minutes."

Left to himself, Brixey, as he washed his hands and brushed his red

hair, faced the problem before him. His uncle, John Linthwaite, was a particularly hale and hearty man of sixty-three. He was well-to-do. He had not a care in the world. He had no business. He spent much of his time in travelling. He was an antiquary of some repute. It was his love of antiquarianism that had brought him to Selchester, where he had proposed to spend a few days before joining his nephew at Winchester preparatory to a joint tour in the south-west of England.

Why, then, this extraordinary disappearance? Accident, surely, there had been some accident—Brixey could think of no other explanation. He knew his uncle's love of exploring old places—there were many old places in Selchester. He might have got into some ruin or other, had a bad fall, be lying there even then, unable to get help—he might be dead.

But, dead or alive—he had to be found. And it was no use speculating, and no use inventing theories. The thing required was that for which Brixey was famous among his journalistic associates—action.

He looked at his watch as he sat down to his supper in the little parlour into which Brackett had first brought him—9.15. Fleet Street and its noise seemed a long way off, and the strange quietude of the old cathedral town inclined Brixey to the opinion that its inhabitants were probably in the habit of going to bed before ten. But between then and midnight Brixey meant to do things, and to extend their doing beyond midnight if necessary.

Once in action he was not inclined to ease off—that, he said to himself, was not the Brixey way. He had been doing sub-editorial work on the *Morning Sentinel* for two years, but before that he had worked as a reporter, and there were certain notable things to his fame and credit in Fleet Street. It was Brixey who tracked the Surbiton murderer to discovery when the police utterly failed; Brixey who got the exclusive news of the Hammerstein-Martin affair, the biggest scoop that Fleet Street had known for many a long day.

And now here was a personal matter, with the added incentive that Richard Brixey, nephew, was something more than fond of John Linthwaite, uncle. They were not only relations, but affectionate friends.

Brixey ate as he did everything else—swiftly. He had got through a plate of hot soup and a steak of cod, and was rapidly devouring a grilled chop when the waiter asked if he would see Mr. Brackett and Inspector Crabbe.

"This minute!" responded Brixey. "Bring 'em in here, just now."

The last mouthful of mutton disappeared as the landlord led in the policeman, and Brixey, with a sharp nod to the official, plunged straight into business.

"Any news, Inspector?" he asked. "I suppose Mr. Brackett's told you who I am?—Mr. Linthwaite's nephew, and out to find him. I propose to start on to that game right here and now, so if you've heard anything—eh?"

Inspector Crabbe, a tall, soldierly-looking man of grave manners, took Brixey in at a comprehensive glance, and recognised him as a person of unbounded energy.

"We've heard nothing whatever, sir, until just now," he answered. "One of my men has just been in to tell me that Mrs. Crosse, the landlady

of the 'Lame Hussar,' believes that Mr. Linthwaite called at her house about eleven o'clock on Tuesday morning—that would be (if it was Mr. Linthwaite) about half an hour after he left this hotel. Anyway, a strange gentleman—elderly—dropped in there for a few minutes, and——

"Where is this place?" demanded Brixey, snatching up his hat. "Up North Street? Come on then, Inspector; that's the first clue I've heard, and we'll be on to it."

"This," he continued as they went out into the courtyard, "is a very serious affair. There's no reason in the world why my uncle should disappear. He was in the very best of health; he's a well-to-do man; he came here to enjoy himself by looking round your old spots, and I'm afraid he's had an accident."

"That's what I'm afraid of, sir," assented Crabbe. "But there are odd features about this matter. You can see for yourself," he went on, as he led Brixey round the corner, "this is a very small town. There are only these four main streets, all going off from the centre here—from that old Market Cross—in it."

"Your uncle was a stranger—and, I'm told, a fine-looking gentleman. How is it nobody saw him on Tuesday morning? At least, how is it we can't hear of anybody who saw him—in a bit of a place like this, where a stranger can scarcely fail to be noticed!"

"Aye!" said Brixey. "But you don't know yet that he wasn't seen by somebody. Now, if it should be that that somebody won't tell—what then?"

"In that case, sir, if you ask me, I should say there's been foul play," answered Crabbe. "Now, had your uncle much money on him?"

"He usually carried about a hundred pounds in his pockets," replied Brixey indifferently. "That's no great incentive to—shall we say murder?"

Crabbe made no answer; but he shook his head. They had walked swiftly up the street, and had come to what Brixey saw to be the old walls of the town. Just before reaching them the inspector pointed to a red-curtained window in a high-gabled, ancient house, in front of which stood a tall pole whence hung an old-fashioned swinging sign.

"This is the spot, sir," he said. "The 'Lame Hussar'—one of our oldest inns."

CHAPTER III

THE WHITE FACE

BRIXEY, before following his guide into the old tavern, took a quick glance at his surroundings. He had already seen that Selchester was a very small town, divided into four segments by two main streets, one of which ran due south and north, the other due east and west; he was aware from an old map which hung in his bedroom at the "Mitre" that it was enclosed by an ancient wall, running round it in an almost perfect circle.

To one of the gates of this wall, the North Bar, he and Crabbe had now come; the "Lame Hussar" stood just within it; to the right a narrow

lane led away in the direction of what appeared to be a belt of woodland, wherein Brixey made out the lines of a high gateway. To this he drew his companion's attention.

"What's that place?" he asked.

"Entrance to the old Priory grounds, sir," replied Crabbe. "There are ruins and things in there—sort of show-place, you understand. As far as I could gather, it must have been there that your uncle was making for—and if what I hear is correct he seems to have turned in here. But we'll soon know that."

He led the way into the tavern, and down a sanded passage towards a parlour in the rear. From its open doorway a tall, elderly woman looked out, and at sight of Crabbe beckoned him to come forward. Crabbe ushered Brixey within, and closed the door behind them.

"Evening, Mrs. Crosse," he said. "I got your message, so I thought I'd walk up myself. This gentleman's the nephew of the gentleman that's missing. He's come down from London to find him. Now, what can you tell?"

The landlady, who had silently motioned her callers to seat themselves, shook her head.

"Why, not much, Mr. Crabbe," she answered. "But, of course, it might lead to something. I've no doubt that the gentleman who came in here is the one that your man told me was missing. A stranger to me, anyway, and I know most Selchester folks."

"Describe him," suggested Brixey.

"A tall, well-made gentleman, sixty or thereabouts, I should say; clean-shaved—a sort of professional look on him," answered Mrs. Crosse promptly. "Dressed in a smart grey tweed, and carrying a gold-mounted umbrella. I put him down as one of these tourists that we see so many of in summer. He came into my front room there—the one with the bow-window—about eleven on Tuesday morning, and asked for a glass of my best bitter ale."

"I invited him in here, but he said he'd rather be where he could look down the street. I took the ale in to him, and he stood in the bow-window while he drank it, and talked, casual-like. And then something happened that I've thought of since, though not until your man came in to-night to make inquiries, Mr. Crabbe."

"Well?" asked Crabbe. "And what was it, Mrs. Crosse?"

"Why, this," replied the landlady. "As he stood there in the window, looking out, Mrs. Byfield came round the corner——"

"Mrs. Byfield!" exclaimed Crabbe.

"Mrs. Byfield of the Minories," assented Mrs. Crosse. "She came round the corner there out of North Street, and turned down towards them Priory gates. Now, it wasn't no fancy on my part, Mr. Crabbe; I saw that gentleman start at the sight of her. He did start. There was no mistaking it. He'd his glass in his hand at the time, and he set it down and looked at me."

"Who's that lady, walking there the other side of the lane?" he says. 'Mrs. Byfield, of the Minories, sir,' says I. 'And who's Mrs. Byfield?' says he. 'Mr. Byfield's dead, sir—some time,' I says. 'He was a retired gentleman.'

"Ah!" he says, sort of careless-like, but still watching her. 'Fine

woman! 'Has been a very handsome one, sir,' I says. 'I remember her when she first came to the town, just after Mr. Byfield married her—which they were married in some foreign place, where they met.' 'Aye?' he says. 'And how long since is that, ma'am?'

"So I thought a bit. 'Well, sir,' I says, 'it'll be getting on to two-and-twenty years since.' 'A long time, ma'am,' he says, with a laugh. 'We were all younger then.' And he then drank off his ale and bade me good day, and he went out. And, of course, Mr. Crabbe, I've never seen him since."

"Which way did he go when he left your house?" asked Brixey.

"Well, I can speak positive as to that, sir," replied the landlady, "for I watched him. He went straight into the Priory grounds—same as Mrs. Byfield had done, a minute or two sooner."

"On her heels, in fact?" suggested Brixey, with a glance at Crabbe.

"On her heels, as you might say, sir," assented Mrs. Crosse. "She'd gone in there, as I've often seen her doing of a morning, and he wouldn't be a couple of minutes after her."

Brixey signed to the inspector and rose. But on his way to the door he looked significantly at the landlady.

"You're the sort of woman that can keep things to yourself," he said. "Keep this to yourself—you understand?"

Mrs. Crosse nodded silently, and her two visitors went out into the night. Brixey pulled out his watch.

"Not yet ten," he said. "Well, Inspector, there's one thing we can do at once. Where does this Mrs. Byfield live?"

"Within a few minutes' walk, sir," replied Crabbe. "You'd like to go there?"

"Just to ask her if she saw my uncle in the Priory grounds that morning," replied Brixey. "No more at present."

"This way, then," said Crabbe. He crossed the lane, took his companion a little way down North Street, and turned into a narrow thoroughfare which presently debouched on a wide space flanked by big, old-fashioned houses.

Crabbe stopped before a big house, the wide front of which was covered with ivy. He glanced at the lower windows, saw lights in them, and rang the bell. A moment later he and Brixey found themselves in a dimly-lighted parlour just within a square hall, waiting. Presently the door opened, and a woman came in—a tall, still handsome woman, whose abundant dark hair was only slightly shot with grey, whose dark eyes were still alert and vivacious.

Brixey was quick to watch those eyes, and he saw a guarded expression come sharply into them. He saw, too, a whitening of the cheeks beneath them, and noticed a sudden, uncontrollable movement of a hand lifted upward.

"Sorry to disturb you at this hour, Mrs. Byfield," began Crabbe apologetically. "The fact is, a gentleman, who was staying at the 'Mitre,' has been missing since Tuesday morning. He was last seen entering the Priory grounds, and we hear that you were in there that morning, about the same time that he went in, so we thought perhaps you could tell us something. This gentleman is the missing gentleman's nephew, and he's very anxious about him."

Brixey spoke, steadily regarding Mrs. Byfield.

"My uncle, who is missing—unaccountably," he said, "is Mr. John Linthwaite, who until a year or two ago was a well-known London solicitor, practising in Lincoln's Inn Fields. There is no reason whatever why he should have made his disappearance, and I am beginning to suspect foul play. I'll tell you precisely what his movements were that morning.

"Now," he added, when he had told her the pertinent facts without repeating Mrs. Crosse's suggestion about the recognition, "may I ask if you saw anything of him in the Priory grounds about that time?"

He was sure of what the answer would be. His observant eyes had seen that Mrs. Byfield had regained full command over herself as Crabbe and he explained their presence and that the colour had come back to her cheeks, and he was quite prepared for the assured and steady voice.

"No!" she said, looking from him to Crabbe. "I was certainly in the Priory grounds at eleven o'clock, or thereabouts, on Tuesday morning, but it was only for a few minutes. I don't remember seeing the gentleman you mention at all. Perhaps he wasn't in the part I was in. I only went there to give a message to the caretaker. The grounds are very extensive," she concluded, glancing meaningly at Crabbe. "Perhaps this gentleman doesn't know them."

"I shall know them better to-morrow," remarked Brixey. He said no more, and presently he and Crabbe were back in North Street, and walking towards the centre of the town.

"Now, Inspector," he said, as they drew near a building which Brixey had previously noted as being the police station, "I don't think we can do more to-night. But listen, there's going to be no expense spared about finding my uncle. To-morrow morning, first thing, I'm going to have a poster out, offering a reward for news of him. And you and your people must do all you can.

"You must have that sheet of water that I've heard of thoroughly searched, and all the old places of the town examined, too. And if, during the night, or early in the morning, you hear anything, let me know at once. As I said just now, expense matters nothing. My uncle's got to be found, dead or alive!"

He turned away with a curt farewell, and went back to the "Mitre," an unlighted cigar between his teeth, his hands plunged deep in his trousers pockets, his whole attitude that of intense thought. Inside the shadowy hall he met Miss Byfield, who, candle in hand, was just about to mount the stairs. She paused, looking at him, and Brixey, going close to her, blurted out what was in his mind.

"Who's that Mrs. Byfield of the Minorities?" he asked. "Same name as yours. Any relation?"

"My aunt by marriage," she answered, watching him closely.

"Are you friends?" demanded Brixey, his eyes still on her.

"No!" she replied.

"Some mystery about it?" he suggested.

Miss Byfield looked up and down the stairs and the hall.

"Something of the sort," she admitted. "I'll tell you afterwards, but——"

The door of the bar parlour opened, and old Brackett, pipe in hand, looked out.

"Any news, sir?" he asked. "Thought I heard your voice."

Brixey nodded to Miss Byfield, and turned in to the landlord. Over a whisky-and-soda and a cigar he talked non-committally for half an hour. But when he was alone in his bedroom, later, he indulged in his habit of muttering.

"As sure as I'm what I am," he growled, "that Mrs. Byfield was lying! She knows something. It's in her that the mystery of the old boy's disappearance lies. Brixey, my lad, here's a stick! Which end of it are you going to lay hands on first?"

He was asking himself that question again when he woke in the grey dawn; he had asked it a dozen times when heavy footsteps came along the corridor outside and a gentle knock sounded on the panels of his door. To his demand as to the identity of his disturber came a reply that hurried him out of bed.

"Inspector Crabbe has some news for you, sir—will you go round to the police station at once?"

CHAPTER IV

THE HAT AND UMBRELLA

BRIXEY hurried himself into indispensable garments and threw open his door. A man stood outside—a shrewd-faced, sharp-eyed fellow who regarded him with interest as he held out Brixey's shoes, already polished.

"You the boots?" asked Brixey.

"That and other things, sir," answered the man with a smile. "Odd-job man."

"Who brought this message?" demanded Brixey.

"A policeman, sir—said you were to have it at once," replied the other. "Like a cup of tea or coffee before you go out, sir?"

"No, thank you," said Brixey, who was already pulling on his shoes. "I'll go straight there." He glanced at his caller, who was lingering at the open door. "Want to say anything?" he asked.

"There was a matter I thought of last night, sir," answered the man, "after I'd heard you was down here. That gentleman, sir, Mr. Linthwaite, he asked me a question before he went out that morning. Wanted to know his way to Mardene Mill."

"Where's that?" asked Brixey.

"North-east of the town, sir, on the Downs," said the boots. "He'd have to pass through a very lonely bit of country to get at that, sir, the way I told him. There's some queer folks camps out thereabouts—vanners, and gipsies, and such-like. Thought I'd mention it, sir."

"What's your name?" inquired Brixey.

"Empidge, sir—Jim Empidge," replied the man.

"You're a sharp-looking chap," said Brixey. "And you no doubt hear a good deal of town gossip. You keep your eyes and ears open, Empidge, and let me know what you hear and see. Eh?"

"I understand, sir," said Empidge, with a scarcely perceptible flicker of an eyelid. "I'll see to it, sir."

"Any bit of news, you know," suggested Brixey. "Now I'm off. Order my breakfast for eight o'clock sharp."

Six was striking from the town clocks as he walked out of the old courtyard into the fresh air of the May morning. There was scarcely a soul about in the streets, and the policeman who admitted him to Inspector Crabbe's presence looked half asleep; Crabbe himself was in little more of a wakeful condition.

"Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Brixey," he said, leading the way into an inner office, "but you said I was to let you know if anything turned up. A man that lives outside the town, Mardene way, knocked me up at a quarter past five and brought me these things. He was on his way to his work when he found them. Can you recognise them?"

He lifted a sheet of brown paper which had covered some objects lying on a side table, and revealed a grey felt Homburg hat and a gold-mounted umbrella.

"Of course," answered Brixey. "Those are my uncle's." He picked up the hat and pointed to the name of the maker. "Always gets his hats there," he said. "And there, too, are his initials on the umbrella."

"The stick of the umbrella's broken," observed Crabbe. "And it was an uncommon stout one, too! Well—there's something."

Brixey took the umbrella in his hands. The silk was wet as if from exposure; the strong hazel stick was snapped a few inches below the crook.

"Where were these things found?" he asked.

Crabbe walked across to a drawer and returned with a large map, which he spread out on the table before Brixey.

"Ordnance map—Selchester and district," he said. "Now, you see here, Mr. Brixey. There's the *Lame Hussar Inn*, where we called last night. There's the *Priory grounds*, and the woodlands in it. That's a path that runs right through the wood on the top side, out of the walls there by that postern gate, and past the sheet of water you've heard about. From that point, you see, it goes away across the country in the direction of *Mardene*."

"I've just heard from the boots at the '*Mitre*' that my uncle asked his way to *Mardene Mill* before he went out on Tuesday morning," remarked Brixey.

"Aye, just so!—that explains things, then," said Crabbe. "For this is the way he'd take. Now, you see where this path leads into a lane—*Foxglove Lane*—leading to the open Downs? That's where the hat and umbrella were picked up, as near as I could gather from the man who brought them, just there. A very lonely spot, too."

Brixey gave a minute to studying the map.

"You say this man comes from *Mardene* every morning to work in *Selchester*?" he asked. "Very well. This is Friday morning. He's come in three times since Tuesday. Presumably he's gone back the same way—three times. Therefore, he's passed the place where he found these things six times since Tuesday. How is it he never saw 'em before?"

"Can't say," answered Crabbe. "He didn't strike me as a very noticing sort of chap. You can see him for yourself—I know where he works. He said they were lying behind some gorse bushes—he caught the gleam of the sun on the gold mounting of the umbrella—that's what drew his attention. But that's not the thing just now, Mr. Brixey."

"No?" said Brixey, affecting interest. "What is, then?"

"You said your uncle would have at least a hundred pounds on him," suggested Crabbe, with a meaning look.

"He never carried less when he was travelling about," replied Brixey. "But, as a matter of fact, I've a pretty good idea what he would have on him. I cashed a cheque for him last Saturday morning for a hundred and fifty, and gave him the money in notes, which, of course, can be traced.

"He left London for Dorking last Saturday afternoon. He spent the week-end at Dorking and came on here Monday afternoon. So he'd probably have at least a hundred and forty pounds on him—perhaps a bit more."

"Aye," said Crabbe, with a knowing look. "And other things, that could be seen, Mr. Brixey! His money couldn't be seen, but he no doubt had valuables that could."

"As to that," answered Brixey, "he had. He wore a very valuable watch and chain—gold, of course—and he'd a diamond scarf-pin that was a bit noticeable, and a very fine diamond ring."

Crabbe picked up the hat and umbrella with a significant gesture, and, carrying them across to a cupboard, turned the key on them.

"Then the whole affair's as plain as a pikestaff, sir!" he exclaimed. "The poor gentleman's been murdered!"

Brixey pulled out a cigarette case and struck a match with fingers that moved as steadily as a machine.

"Think so?" he said. "Um! Did you ever study the natural history of fallacies, Inspector? No? Well, I have—just a bit. And in this case I should say that what you've just said doesn't follow. *Non sequitur*, my dear sir! But I'm quite sure you've already got a theory."

"I know what I think," answered Crabbe, who had a suspicion that Brixey was pulling his leg. "And it's what anybody would think who exercised common sense."

"Common sense," observed Brixey dryly, "is a valuable asset. Now, Empidge, the man at the 'Mitre,' tells me that round about this Foxglove Lane it's a usual thing for gipsies and caravan dwellers to camp. That so?"

"It is so—and I reckon some of 'em have done your uncle in," said Crabbe. "That's about it!"

"Then, in that case, you'll give your attention to ascertaining who was about there on Tuesday, and if they're still there, and where they've moved to if they aren't there now?" suggested Brixey.

"Of course—and at once," assented Crabbe. "I shall go out that way with some of my men as soon as I've had breakfast."

"Good," said Brixey. "You follow your line. In the meantime, can you tell me of a printer—a man who can do work quickly?"

"There's a good printing office just down the street," answered Crabbe. "Rollinson's. Then you won't go out there with us?"

Brixey shook his head and pointed to the ordnance map.

"That's enough for me," he said. "I know where the things were found. But when you want me, come to the 'Mitre.'"

He went away without more words, and turned slowly down the street. Early as it was, the printer's establishment was open, and while

a small boy went to fetch its proprietor, Brixey leaned against the counter and thought.

"Conclusion one," he muttered, "is that Mrs. Byfield told me a lie last night. Conclusion two is that my uncle's hat and umbrella were carried to Foxglove Lane and thrown away there. And the next thing—this."

When the printer came down, half dressed, he found a red-haired stranger leaning over his counter preparing copy. That copy, when finished, proved to be a terse announcement to the effect that one hundred pounds would be paid to anyone who would give information which would lead to the discovery of Mr. John Linthwaite, missing since the previous Tuesday, such information to be brought direct to Richard Brixey at the Mitre Hotel.

"You'll have that printed, and you'll get it posted and distributed broadcast by noon to-day," commanded Brixey, as he pulled out a pocket-book. "Reckon up the whole job—printing, posting, and distributing—and I'll pay you right now. Speed is the thing."

"Town and district, I suppose, sir?" asked the printer, beginning to figure out his costs.

"Town and district," answered Brixey. "Take in a twelve-mile radius."

He went back to the "Mitre" and leisurely completed his toilet. To all appearance he was an unconcerned young man who might have been taken for an idle tourist when, at eight o'clock, he strolled down to his private parlour and rang the bell for his breakfast.

He looked just as idle when, three-quarters of an hour later, he lounged out into the courtyard and gave a cheery good-morning to old Brackett, who stood at the entrance looking out on the waking town. Brixey led him off towards a quiet corner.

"You're the sort of man one can give confidences to, I think, Mr. Brackett," he said. "I'm going to give you mine." He went on to tell him of what had happened at the "Lame Hussar," and of Mrs. Byfield's direct negative to the straight question which he had put to her.

"Now," he continued, "between you and me, I don't believe Mrs. Byfield. I believe my uncle recognised her as somebody he knew. I believe he went after her, to speak to her. I believe he did speak to her. And so—between you and me, again—who is Mrs. Byfield?"

Brackett, who had been listening with vast interest to Brixey's story, half turned and jerked his thumb in the direction of the bow-windows of the house.

"That young lady, my book-keeper, is a Byfield," he said. "She's the niece of Martin Byfield, Mrs. Byfield's late husband."

"Well?" said Brixey. "What then?"

"Come into that private sitting-room of yours, sir," answered the landlord. "I'll fetch her in. Between her and me, we can tell you something, but as to what it amounts to, in relation to this affair—well, I know nothing."

CHAPTER V

WHO WAS MRS. BYFIELD?

SINCE the previous evening, Brixey had been wondering how it came about that a member of the Byfield family should be occupying the comparatively humble position of book-keeper at the Mitre Hotel. He had seen enough of the Byfield house in the Minories to know that it signified money. Crabbe had spoken of Mrs. Byfield as of one well endowed with the world's goods.

He had also seen enough of Georgina Byfield as they journeyed together to Selchester to discover that she was a well-educated young woman, with ideas of her own, and not at all the sort of girl whom he would have expected to find making out bills and posting ledgers in a country town tavern, however long established. He was still wondering about this when Brackett came in with the object of his thoughts and carefully closed the door behind them.

"I've just told Miss Byfield what you told me outside there, Mr. Brixey," said the landlord. "She thinks what you seem to think—that your uncle may have known Mrs. Byfield at some time."

Brixey handed Georgina a chair and motioned Brackett to take another.

"Look here," he said. "Between the three of us, I've already got some suspicion about Mrs. Byfield, consequent, of course, on what Mrs. Crosse said last night, and of what I observed in Mrs. Byfield herself. Now, then, who is, or was, Mrs. Byfield? You see, my uncle had a big practice as a solicitor. He may have had dealings with her, and have recognised her. Anyway, I want to know all I can find out about her."

"Here's the position. According to Mrs. Crosse, a dependable witness, my uncle recognises Mrs. Byfield; he hurries out after her; he's never seen again from that time, and Mrs. Byfield says she never saw him. Are there reasons why Mrs. Byfield should wish it not to be known that she did see him?"

He looked at Georgina, and Georgina shook her head.

"I don't know anything of Mrs. Byfield's antecedents," she answered. "As to her coming to the town, Mr. Brackett can tell more than I can. I only know what I've heard."

"It was this way, you see, sir," said Brackett. "I, of course, have lived here in Selchester all my days, so I know all the history of the place."

"Now, about these Byfields. They're an old family in the town, Mr. Brixey. And as regards what you might call the present generation, we'll go back to when I was a young man. There were then two Byfields—Martin Byfield and Peter Byfield, his younger brother, this young lady's father. They both had money—a certain amount, you understand."

"Now, Martin Byfield went into trade with his, and he made a rare lot more. Peter, I'm sorry to say, lived on his capital, and, to tell the plain truth, he got through everything before he died. It just about

lasted out. Missie here won't mind me saying that her poor father was his own worst enemy."

"Say whatever you like, Mr. Brackett," said Georgina. "You know all the facts."

"Well, to get to, say, twenty-two or twenty-three years ago," continued Brackett. "Martin Byfield had made a big fortune, and had retired from business, and was living in that house in the Minorities that you called at last night, sir. He was a bachelor. He began to travel a good deal. He was always going on the Continent. He used to take with him a sort of manservant or valet that he had—a man named Wetherby."

"Wetherby's living here in the town now. And it'll be just twenty-two years this next winter that they went off to the Riviera for a few months. They came back in spring, and Martin Byfield brought a wife home with him."

"This present Mrs. Byfield?" asked Brixey, who was making careful mental notes. "The one I've seen?"

"The same, sir," answered Brackett. "Brought her home, a bride. A rare handsome woman she was, too; a woman, I should say, of twenty-eight or thirty—maybe a year or two more."

"Nothing was said by Martin Byfield as to who she was, nor as to where they met, but it came out through Wetherby that his master had met her at Cannes, or Nice, or somewhere about there, and that she was a young widow from one of the Colonies—New Zealand or Australia; I forget which."

"Wetherby let it out, too, that they were married, after a short acquaintance, at the English church at Monaco. So that's how this Mrs. Byfield came to Selchester. Now, as I'm telling this story, we come to the relations between Martin Byfield, her husband, and Peter Byfield, his brother—this young lady's father."

Brixey turned and glanced at Georgina, who was listening quietly to the old landlord.

"I hope you don't mind these recollections—or revelations?" he said. "I assure you I shouldn't ask for them if I didn't think them necessary."

"I don't mind anything that Mr. Brackett tells," she answered. "Mr. Brackett knows everything."

"Missie and me understand each other, sir," remarked Brackett, with a nod at his book-keeper. "We're old friends. Well, now, up to the time of his marriage, Martin had been good friends with his brother Peter, who, I may tell you, had married two or three years previously. But it was noticed that after Martin came home with his wife from foreign parts the old friendliness died out, and, to cut matters short, it came to this—the two brothers were on little more than speaking terms."

"Some said the two wives couldn't hit it off—some said that Mrs. Martin Byfield didn't like her husband's relations, and wouldn't encourage their coming to the house in the Minorities. But what is certain is that she had a tremendous influence over her husband, and did what she liked with him, and that for some years before their deaths the two brothers, Martin and Peter, had been more or less of strangers."

"However, if they weren't united in life, they were, as you might

say, united in death, for they both died within a month of each other, just three years ago. With this difference, Mr. Brixey—and missie won't mind my saying it—Martin died a very rich man; Peter died very poor."

"Did Martin leave any children?" asked Brixey.

"One lad, sir—young Fanshawe Byfield, this girl's cousin, who's now close on twenty-one," answered Brackett. "You'll not be long in the town before you see him. He's a handful for anybody to manage—between us three. I won't have him here in the 'Mitre'—I've warned him off.

"Now, Martin, although he'd so much to leave—he was a very wealthy man—died intestate; leastways, nobody was ever able to bring any will of his to light, and so, of course, there were no legacies for anybody, and everything fell into the hands of the widow and the son.

"Nothing for his niece here, sir!—not a penny. And as her father had left next to nothing, and her mother was dead—well, missie here had to earn her living, and——"

"And Mr. Brackett gave her the chance to do it," interrupted Georgina softly. "Now Mr. Brixey knows that secret, Mr. Brackett, so——"

"I see, I see," exclaimed Brixey. "Good man!—I understand. But I say," he went on hastily. "You mayn't quite see why, but what you've told me makes me all the more convinced that Mrs. Crosse's story is true, and that my uncle recognised Mrs. Byfield as somebody he knew or had known.

"Now, look here. My uncle had an extensive practice in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and to my knowledge he knew a lot of curious people, and was mixed up in some odd affairs. Moreover, he'd an extraordinary memory for faces—it's not so long ago that he said to me in the course of conversation about such things that he could remember a client if he hadn't seen him for twenty years. I'm certain that he recognised Mrs. Byfield.

"Now, if he did, and if—as seems probable—he went after her, the fact of that recognition makes his subsequent disappearance all the more remarkable. And I'd like to know something. Has this Mrs. Byfield any people of her own? Did or does she have relations, friends, to visit her? Do you happen to know that, Mr. Brackett?—or you, Miss Byfield?"

"In other words, sir," said Brackett, "you want to know this: Who is or who was Mrs. Byfield? All right. I can answer for the entire population of Selchester. Nobody knows—not even after twenty years."

Brixey sat thinking in silence for a few minutes. At last he rose and picked up his hat.

"One question occurs to me, just now, out of what you've told me. Were people surprised to find that Martin Byfield died intestate?"

Brackett glanced at Georgina.

"Seeing that this child's father and mother were dead and she left without means, some people were more than surprised, sir!" he replied with emphasis. "It was a black shame that Martin Byfield didn't make a will and provide for her!"

"But you said Martin and his brother died about the same time," said Brixey.

"Peter died first," answered Brackett. "Martin had time—three weeks. He himself died very suddenly. He'd time, plenty of time, to do something for his niece, let alone make a will!"

Brixey turned again to Georgina.

"It seems a shame to ask such private questions," he said. "But when you were left like that, did your uncle do nothing for you?"

Georgina glanced at the landlord, and then at Brixey.

"Mr. Brackett and I don't agree on this point," she said. "But, if you want to know the truth—that is, as I see it—I don't believe that my uncle Martin ever knew my father was dead."

"Can't credit it, my girl!" muttered Brackett. "Must have known!"

"You've a reason for that opinion," suggested Brixey, looking at Georgina. "What is it?"

"I think Mrs. Byfield took care he shouldn't know," she answered.

Brixey nodded and made for the door.

"All right!" he said. "All between ourselves, you know. We'll talk more, later. Just now I've some important business."

He hurried straight down to the post office and wrote out a telegram:

*William Gaffkin, 26, Alpha Road, Brondesbury, London, N.W.—
Mr. Linthwaite has unaccountably disappeared under strange circumstances. Come by next express and meet me at Mitre Hotel, Selchester.
—Richard Brixey.*

That done, and the message handed in, Brixey lighted his pipe and walked slowly up the street in the direction of the "Lame Hussar."

CHAPTER VI

THE LILAC PRINT GOWN

INSTEAD of turning into the open door of the tavern, Brixey, with no more than a passing glance at it, walked forward along the side street to the gates of the Priory grounds. It was then ten o'clock, and already nursemaids, in charge of children and perambulators, were beginning to seek the shade of the belts of trees or the sunlight which lay gaily over the open lawns.

Once inside Brixey stood and took a comprehensive glance around him. He had heard of this place as a popular resort of the townsfolk, and he wanted to get an idea of its general situation and appearance. He found himself contemplating a wide expanse of green, evidently used, as to one part of it, for cricket, as to another, for lawn tennis.

From where he stood, and all round the farther side, ran a thick belt of woodland through certain open spaces in which he caught glimpses of the town walls.

In one of these open spaces between the trees he saw the little postern gate in the walls which Crabbe had indicated on the ordnance map; beyond it he saw water shining in the sun. That, of course, he said, was the sheet of water that he had heard of more than once. And near him

lay the path which, according to Jim Empidge, Mr. Linthwaite would have taken if he had followed out his intention of walking to the old ruin known as Mardene Mill.

But Brixey's immediate attention fixed itself on the ruins of the old Priory, which stood on a plateau between the belt of woodland and the open lawns. He had turned over a local guide to Selchester as he breakfasted, and he knew these ruins to be the remains of a house of the Augustinian canons, and one of the best preserved monuments of antiquity in the south of England.

The high, square tower stood intact; much of the roofless church was uninjured; a good deal of the surrounding cloister was left. Part of the cloister he at once saw to be in use as a modern dwelling; a cheery curl of blue smoke was rising skyward from a tall chimney in its squat roof. There was an ornamental garden laid out in front of this, and in it a tall, dark-faced man, somewhat gipsyish in appearance, was busily planting out flowers from an array of red pots which stood ranged near him.

Brixey had learnt from the guide-book that there was a small museum housed in these old ruins, and he presently crossed the lawn and made towards a door on the carved posts of which hung a framed placard whereon the terms of admission were inscribed.

The man in the garden looked up as he passed, and gave an unconcerned reply to Brixey's observation that the morning was fine; evidently he set Brixey down as another specimen of the tourist tribe. But as Brixey approached the entrance to the museum, the door of the house was opened, and a young woman stepped out and stood waiting his approach.

Brixey had done no more than glance at the gipsy-looking man in the garden, but he looked at this young woman hard and long. She was, he said to himself, well worth looking at. Moreover, as she stood there on the steps before the museum door, quietly waiting, she showed no indisposition to be looked at, and Brixey used his power of observation to the full as he slowly drew near.

A tallish, slender, lissom young woman, apparently twenty-four to twenty-five years of age, brown-haired, brown-eyed, pretty in a piquant and provoking fashion, dressed in a lilac print gown, the only ornament of which was a knot of gay ribbon at an open throat; a quietly elusive, demure expression about the corners of a pair of red lips; a watchful air about the half-shaded eyes—these were the matters which Brixey took in and immediately drew some conclusions from.

Here, he thought, was a young person who had her wits about her, and probably knew very well how to use them.

"Do you wish to see the museum, sir?" asked the young woman, as he walked towards the steps. "It's not supposed to be open till half-past ten, but I can let you in if you like."

"You're the caretaker, I suppose?" suggested Brixey.

The young woman indicated the man working in the garden.

"My father's the caretaker," she answered. "I'm at home now, so I help him. Those are what most people come to look at—the Roman remains."

Brixey cast a glance at the glass-topped show-cases which ran down one side of the ancient room.

"And this place was the refectory of the old monks who lived here," continued the young woman. "Built about 1380, they say—that's all I know. Except," she added, evidently wishing to be gracious, "that that old boat was dug out of Selchester Harbour some years ago—they say it's over two thousand years old."

"Ought to be dry enough to make good firewood by now, then," observed Brixey.

"You don't care for old things, I see?" said the young woman.

"Not so much as for young ones," replied Brixey with a bold glance. "Bit dullish here for anybody like you, isn't it?"

The young woman, who showed no disposition to remove herself, gave her visitor a glance of intelligence.

"Oh, well, we get other people than old antiquaries to see us sometimes," she answered. "Besides, I haven't been home so very long. I've lived in London a good deal."

"My spot," said Brixey, who was rapidly reckoning up his new acquaintance. "Ah, there's nothing like London, is there? What were you doing there?"

"West End milliner's place for two years," replied the young woman readily. "Of course, it is dull here in Selchester; nothing doing most of the time."

"Ah, well, you get a bit of sensation now and then," observed Brixey. "What about this old gentleman's strange disappearance from the 'Mitre'? You've heard of that, I suppose?"

Brixey was keeping his eyes open, watching keenly without seeming to watch. But no more than a mere look of assent came into the demurely pretty face.

"Oh, we had a policeman asking something about that yesterday," she said. "We'd never seen anything of him."

"I heard last night that he'd been seen entering these grounds," remarked Brixey. "On Tuesday morning, that was. You don't remember seeing an elderly gentleman?"

The young woman shrugged her shoulders.

"There are a good many elderly gentlemen come into these grounds," she replied. "I don't spend my time in watching them. Neither my father nor I remember seeing this one. People cross through the wood there to get outside the town into the country. There's a queer old place outside there that these antiquaries go to see—Mardene Mill."

"Ah, I was thinking of strolling that way myself," said Brixey. "Which way does one go? I'll chuck the Roman remains for this morning—see 'em another time, perhaps."

The young woman led him outside and pointed to the postern gate in the trees.

"Straight through," she said. Then, as Brixey showed signs of moving, she gave him a demure glance. "Coming back again some time?" she asked.

"I'm stopping in the town for a bit," answered Brixey. "See you later, eh?"

He gave her a purposely admiring glance as he turned off, and she answered it with a smile and a nod as she went back into the house. Brixey passed the man in the garden with another nod, and went on

through the trees and past the sheet of water, just then lively with water-fowl, and into Foxglove Lane.

"Demure and sly young party!" he mused. "Good bit of a flirt, I think. Do no harm to cultivate her acquaintance. Nor that of the dark-faced gentleman who's planting out innocent flowers.

"If the poor old boy did go into those grounds, and if he did talk to Mrs. Byfield there, and if those two, father and daughter, saw that interview, and if Mrs. Byfield squared 'em to say nothing—well, I should say they could be squared!"

He went on, down Foxglove Lane, looking about him. The lane, at first running through high hedgerows, soon changed into a mere cart-track crossing an open moor. In the distance Brixey saw the ruinous walls of an ancient building which he took to be Mardene Mill. Before he had come half-way to it he encountered an elderly weather-beaten man, who, leaning on a shepherd's crook, was watching a flock of sheep.

"Morning, master!" said Brixey, coming to a halt. "Been about here long?"

"Ever since first thing, sir," answered the man with a smile. "Hereabouts, anyway."

"Seen anything of the police round this quarter?" asked Brixey. "Inspector Crabbe, for instance? Seen him?"

The shepherd pointed to some cottages which lay half a mile distant across the moor, evidently a part of Selchester that had sprung up outside the walls.

"'Tain't not ten minutes since Mr. Crabbe and one o' they men of his druv' back across there, sir," he replied. "Been up here they had and along the lane. I minded their hoss and trap for 'em while they was looking about. 'Twas about this here hat and umbrella what was found this morning as they come. And I knows something about that, too."

"What?" asked Brixey.

The shepherd laughed and indicated a clump of gorse that grew high by the side of the track.

"'Twas there, master, behind that goss, as Jack Tisdale found that there hat and umbrella," he replied. "Found 'em here this daybreak, he did. All right; but if he did—and I ain't sayin' he didn't, 'cause I've no doubt he did—if he did, they'd been put there since last night.

"I been round about here for three days along o' them sheep, and there weren't no hat and umbrella at that spot when I went home six o'clock yesterday, and that's gospel truth."

"Tell Crabbe that?" asked Brixey.

"Ain't much good ever tellin' they chaps anything they don't want to hear, master," replied the shepherd sardonically. "Don't suit 'em always. But I did tell 'em."

Brixey talked a little longer, and then went thoughtfully back to the town—to lounge idly in the "Mitre" until after lunch. But at four o'clock he was down at the station to meet the London express, and as it came steaming in he caught sight of Mrs. Byfield, who, like himself, had evidently come to meet it.

Seeing her, Brixey, the instant that his expected man stepped down, seized him, and without ceremony twisted him round.

"Gaffkin!" he exclaimed. "You were my uncle's confidential clerk

for ten years. Look, have you ever seen that woman there—the tall, handsome woman—in his office? Think, man!”

Gaffkin, a quiet, solemn-faced man, fixed a steady, reflective look on Mrs. Byfield.

“No, sir,” he answered. “Never saw her in my life before, there or anywhere.”

CHAPTER VII

GAFFKIN

BRIXEY's momentary excitement died out as quickly as it had arisen. He turned unconcernedly away from looking at Mrs. Byfield, who stood a little way off, greeting a young woman who had just alighted from the train, and glanced at Gaffkin's small and neat portmanteau.

“Got any more luggage?” he asked laconically.

“All that I shall require is in here, Mr. Brixey,” replied Gaffkin.

Like the portmanteau, he, too, was neat and small—a quiet, self-contained man, who looked more like a highly respectable valet than a solicitor's clerk.

“Any news of Mr. Linthwaite, sir?” he inquired, as they walked out of the station. “Of course, I'm all in the dark.”

Brixey wheeled his companion into the street and pulled him up before the first shop they came to.

“Everything's in the dark,” he said, pointing to a bill which hung prominently displayed. “There's the first effort I've made to dispel the darkness, Gaffkin. I want your help; you're the only man I could think of. As far as I can see, there's some extraordinary mystery about my uncle's disappearance.”

Gaffkin read the contents of the reward bill.

“Since Tuesday!” he exclaimed. “And now it's Friday afternoon. Nothing been heard, Mr. Brixey—nothing at all?”

“Come along to the ‘Mitre,’” answered Brixey. “I've booked a room there for you. We'll have a nip of tea, and I'll tell you all I know. And then we've got to do a lot of thinking.”

In the private sitting-room, behind a carefully closed door, Brixey told his uncle's old clerk everything that had transpired since his own arrival the previous night, and Gaffkin, who since he had left John Linthwaite's employment had been carrying on the business of a private inquiry agent, listened silently and carefully, weighing the evidence with due appreciation.

“And that was Mrs. Byfield you pointed out just now, sir?” he said when Brixey had finished. “Just so, and you thought she might have been one of Mr. Linthwaite's old clients? May have been, Mr. Brixey, but, if so, it was before my time.”

“I was with your uncle in Lincoln's Inn Fields for the last ten years of his practice, and I'm certain she never came there during that time. I never forget faces, sir. I've trained myself that way. That's a noticeable woman. Still, Mr. Linthwaite may have known her before I went to him. The landlady, Mrs. Crosse, had no doubt that he recognised her?”

"No more than I have that he went after her," said Brixey.

"Then the thing to do," replied Gaffkin, "is to try back, and to find out all her antecedents—a stiff job. But it's a most extraordinary thing that no one has come forward to say they saw Mr. Linthwaite in those grounds. Somebody must have seen him."

"Somebody may come forward yet," remarked Brixey. "A hundred pounds reward may loosen a tongue or two. But now, Gaffkin, these police chaps—they're already on the theory that my uncle was murdered by tramps, or vanners, or gipsies, or something of that sort. You know what they are when they start a line of their own. Well, let 'em take it. We've got to go deeper."

"My uncle may have been murdered, but if he has, it's not been because of the money in his pocket and the diamond in his necktie. The reason's been a deeper one than that. And it seems to me that the thing to find out is: Is there any person here in this town who had reasons—weighty reasons—for silencing him?"

"A big order, Mr. Brixey," said Gaffkin. "It means, as I say, going back. You want me to stop here?"

"Till he's found—alive or dead—or accounted for," answered Brixey. "I shall stop. I'm on my holidays, and expense, of course, is neither here nor there. He's got to be found!"

"Very good, sir," said Gaffkin. "Then the only thing you've mentioned to me up to now that I can work on is the fact that there's a man in this town who was with the late Martin Byfield when he was married at Monaco—Wetherby."

"I must get hold of him, and use a bit of caution in getting what information I can out of him. Get to know from the landlord here where this man can be found, and I'll manage to get in touch with him, quietly."

"I'll do that now," agreed Brixey. "And I'll order dinner for six o'clock," he added, as he went off to find Brackett.

"I've found out where this man Wetherby's to be seen," said Brixey, returning in a few minutes. "He's head waiter at the Cavalier Hotel, a few doors away. I'll leave that business to you, Gaffkin. When we've had a bit of dinner, try your hand on him. I needn't tell you how to go about it. You're a past-master at that sort of thing, I fancy."

"Leave it to me, sir," said Gaffkin. "You won't mind a ten-pound note, I dare say, Mr. Brixey?"

"Nor a twenty," replied Brixey. "Don't let that stand in the way."

Left alone after dinner, when Gaffkin had gone out on his mission to the Cavalier Hotel, Brixey set to work on a job which he had been meditating since early morning. Full of concern as he was for his uncle, the newsman's instinct was strong in him, and he was going to make a big feature of Linthwaite's strange disappearance for the *Sentinel*.

Linthwaite was a well-known man, of repute in legal circles, a member of one or two London companies, a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries—many people would be deeply interested in news of him. Brixey intended the *Sentinel* to have exclusive news, to begin with.

He had been meditating a first message all day—a message that would work up intense interest without going into too much detail, and would exclude personal details such as those relating to Mrs. Byfield.

To-morrow, he said, he would follow it up with more. And he had a double object—he would not only be sending good copy to his paper, but drawing public attention to the affair. Brixey believed in public attention to anything, and now, left alone, he pulled out a sheaf of Press telegram forms and began to write.

Brixey finished his message and walked down to the post office with it. The lamplighters were going about their work as he returned towards the "Mitre," and underneath a lamp, just lit up, he encountered Gaffkin, who drew him aside from the passers-by.

"I've hit on something straight off, Mr. Brixey," said Gaffkin. "There's a man here in Selchester who used to come regularly to Mr. Linthwaite's office some years ago. I know him as well by sight as I know you. He's in the bar at the 'Cavalier' just now. Come in here, sir, and I'll tell you what I know of him."

CHAPTER VIII

MR. MESHAM

BRIXEY and Gaffkin were at that moment standing outside one of the old gateways which gave access to the Cathedral Close. Silently they walked within it and paced along a quiet lane, fenced about with high walls, until they came to a point where they were quite alone. Even in this solitude Gaffkin dropped his voice to a whisper.

"I don't know who this man is," he said, "I don't even know his name. But, as I say, I know him well, by sight, as a man who used to come to the office in Lincoln's Inn Fields. He came there twice a year.

"He first came when I'd been with Mr. Linthwaite about three years. After that he came regularly, at six-monthly intervals, until Mr. Linthwaite retired, two years ago, when I, of course, left him. He's the same man, without the slightest doubt."

"Came there all that time, regularly, and yet you don't know his name?" said Brixey. "Queer!"

"No," answered Gaffkin. "I always knew there was a mystery about him. I remember very well indeed the first time he called. It was in spring—about this time. He walked into the outer office one morning. I attended to him. He leaned over the counter and said, in a whisper, 'Tell Mr. Linthwaite that Mr. X is here.'

"He was at once shown in. After that, he came, as I say, at six-monthly intervals—every spring, every autumn. And though Mr. Linthwaite never mentioned him to me, never said one word to me about his visits, I'd a very good idea as to why he came—in fact, it was no idea, it was a certainty."

"Well?" asked Brixey.

"Every time he came, from the first," said Gaffkin, "Mr. Linthwaite used to send me out to cash a cheque for seventy-five pounds."

"His own cheque?" inquired Brixey.

"Mr. Linthwaite's cheque—yes," replied Gaffkin. "Always the same amount. I used to get it in notes and gold. And, of course, it was for this man."

"Did you never see anything in the shape of a receipt?" asked Brixey.

"Never. If the man gave any receipt, Mr. Linthwaite kept it among his private papers," said Gaffkin. "It never came among the business receipts."

"You're sure this is the same man?" said Brixey. "No mistake?"

"No mistake, sir—I'd know him among a thousand!" asserted Gaffkin.

"Remember," he continued impressively, "it's only two years since I last saw him in Lincoln's Inn Fields. I saw no difference in him except that he's now rather more smartly dressed than when I saw him last, though he was always well dressed in those days."

"Where did you come across him to-night?" asked Brixey.

"I saw him going into the 'Cavalier' by one door as I came out at another. He went into the lounge," answered Gaffkin.

"Let's go and have a look at him," said Brixey. "But first, that man Wetherby. Did you find him?"

"Yes, and got out of him all he knows—at least, all I wanted to know just now—in a few minutes," replied Gaffkin.

"Martin Byfield met his wife at Nice. She was a Mrs. Sunderland, a young widow from Australia. They were married at the English church at Monaco, about five weeks after their first meeting. Wetherby was present. That's all—you already knew as much."

"Except her name," said Brixey. "Sunderland—Mrs. Sunderland. All right. Now, where's this place where the man is?"

Gaffkin led him out of the old gateway, up the street, and past the "Mitre," to a modern-looking hotel which faced on the point where the main streets of the town intersected at the Market Cross.

"As far as I can make out," observed Gaffkin, "this house, the 'Cavalier,' appears to be the popular resort of the young bloods of Selchester. The 'Mitre,' I think, is too highly proper and respectable. The old landlord's mighty particular, and prefers a family trade to a popular one. This place has a lounge bar, and it's pretty full. All the better—we can perhaps see without being seen."

He led Brixey into a long, low-ceilinged room arranged as a lounge, with numerous alcoves and quiet corners, and furnished with a bar which ran the entire length of the farther side, and was presided over by a couple of smartly-dressed barmaids.

Here and there small groups of men were gathered about the tables in the alcoves, but the majority of those present—a numerous company—were lined up along the bar, and several of them had ranged themselves round a tall, elderly man, who, glass in hand, was evidently laying down the law with unction, and in what looked to be enjoyment of the sound of his own voice.

"The thing's ridiculous!" this person was saying. "Any man who knows anything of the world—and if there's nobody else here who knows it, I can safely claim that I do—knows very well that men often disappear just as this gentleman's done—for their own purposes."

"I said to Crabbe just now, 'Crabbe,' I said, 'you're a dee'd clever policeman, Crabbe, but you're like all the rest of your calling—a bit too previous,' I said. 'Don't go making trouble where no trouble is, Crabbe,' I said."

" 'You want to get up a grand *cause célèbre*,' I said. 'Take the opinion of a hard-bitten old man of the world, Crabbe,' I said. 'The gentleman's just made himself scarce because he wanted to.' That's what I said to Crabbe—and damme, what I'd say to anybody!"

Gaffkin drew Brixey into an alcove that lay in shadow, and motioning to a waiter who was hovering about, ordered whisky-and-soda.

"That's the man!" he whispered, nudging his companion. "Take no notice. We'll be hearing his name in a minute."

Brixey, under cover of lighting his pipe, took a careful look at the oracular person. He was a man of apparently between fifty and sixty years of age, still handsome in a rakish, rather worse-for-wear fashion, who sported a grizzled moustache brushed aggressively upward towards his fresh-coloured cheeks, and wore a monocle in his right eye.

His dress suggested the sportsman; a feather or two from a pheasant's wing ornamented the band of his green felt hat, worn at a defiant angle; in his hand he carelessly swung a stick furnished at its extremity with a steel spud for cutting out weeds. A self-assertive, self-opinionated person, this, thought Brixey, and evidently a little god among the circle which surrounded him.

"That's what I'd say to anybody!" he repeated, and set down a tumbler which he had held in his left hand as he talked. "Common sense! 'Crabbe,' I said to our inspector, 'don't make mystery where there's no mystery.' That's what I said—and what I say. Give me the same old thing, my dear."

"All the same," remarked one of the loungers, "a hundred pounds is a hundred pounds, and there are plenty of folks in Selchester who'd be glad to handle it, Mr. Mesham."

Gaffkin nudged Brixey again. Mesham—Mr. Mesham. And Brixey returned the nudge in token of his understanding. The Mr. X. of the Lincoln's Inn Fields days was now the Mr. Mesham of Selchester.

Mr. Mesham took up the replenished tumbler and lifted it. At that moment the waiter who had just served Brixey and Gaffkin turned up the light in their alcove, and the glare fell full on Gaffkin.

Mesham, in the act of drinking, saw Gaffkin, and after a sudden stare and start, obvious though almost imperceptible, hastily drank off his liquor, set down the glass again, and pulled out his watch.

"Aye, just so!" he said absently. "To be sure. By Jove! I'd no idea it was as late as it is. Promised to meet Hetherington at the club at eight, and it's ten past now. Bye-bye, boys. See you later, perhaps."

He went swiftly out of the door into the street, and Gaffkin, with a sharp whisper to Brixey, went after him, with Brixey at his heels. Before Mesham had gone many yards, Gaffkin was at his elbow.

"Excuse me, sir," he said quietly and politely. "Happening to be in the bar you've just left, I recognised you as a gentleman who used to call on Mr. Linthwaite at his office in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Mr. X."

Mesham drew himself up, and glanced uneasily at Brixey, who had come up to Gaffkin's side. Brixey stared back, watchfully, and Mesham transferred his glance to Gaffkin.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"I was Mr. Linthwaite's clerk during the whole of the time you

called there," answered Gaffkin. "I remember you very well, and all the circumstances of your visits. And I think you recognise me."

"What do you want?" growled Mesham. "And who is this with you? If you're a couple of detectives, you can go elsewhere with your questions."

"I am Mr. John Linthwaite's nephew. My name is at the foot of the reward bill which you were discussing just now," said Brixey with suave intonation. "I am naturally anxious to find my uncle. As Mr. Gaffkin tells me that you were familiar with my uncle's appearance, and as you evidently live in Selchester, may I ask you a question?"

"Have you seen anything of Mr. Linthwaite? He was here, and about town, on Monday evening and Tuesday morning. Did you chance to see him?"

Mesham, it was plain to Brixey, was on his guard. He was watching both his questioners. And suddenly he spoke, bending forward with a knowing leer.

"Is this affair in the hands of the police?" he asked. "Of course! Haven't I heard all about it from Crabbe? Then, when I've anything to say, I'll say it to Crabbe. You're strangers to me. I know nothing about you."

He swung on his heel and marched off in the direction of the Market Cross, and Brixey, without comment, signed to Gaffkin to follow him into the "Mitre." He beckoned Brackett out of the bar parlour into the private sitting-room.

"Look here," he said, when they were alone. "We just want you to tell us if you know a man who's known here as Mr. Mesham? Do you?"

The old landlord smiled, wagging his head.

"Everybody knows Mesham!" he answered. "That is, as far as there's anything to be known about him. But that's not much."

"Who is he?" asked Brixey.

"A stranger," replied Brackett. "He came to the town about two years ago. He lives in very good rooms over Strike's, the saddler's; he's a bachelor. Nobody knew anything about him when he came. Nobody knows anything now, except that he's evidently got plenty of money. He spends his time lounging about the town, either at the club, or at the 'Cavalier,' and he amuses himself with a bit of amateur photography, and a bit of fishing, and a bit of shooting, and so on."

"Sometimes he drops in here, but the 'Cavalier's' more to his fancy. We're too old-fashioned and sober-going for his tastes. That's about all I know, Mr. Brixey."

"He wasn't a Selchester man, then, originally?" asked Gaffkin.

"No, sir, not he! Never saw him in the place until he came," answered the landlord. "And I never heard where he came from, either. Nobody knew him. He just came, took those rooms, and settled down. And wherever he gets his money from, he's not short of it. He——"

The waiter knocked at the door and looked at his master.

"Beg pardon, sir—Reverend Mr. Felgrave to see Mr. Brixey," he announced.

"One of our clergymen," whispered Brackett. "Vicar of St. Fridolin's."

"Bring Mr. Felgrave in," said Brixey. He glanced at Gaffkin and smiled. "Now we're going to get some news," he muttered. "This is the first-fruits of the reward bill!"

CHAPTER IX

THE VICAR OF ST. FRIDOLIN

THE old landlord stood aside as the waiter ushered in a little, rather nervous-looking, sharp-featured, big-eyed clergyman, who glanced about as if he were not quite sure of his surroundings, and was anxious to gain some confidence in them. Catching sight of Brackett he smiled a little, taking Brixey and Gaffkin in with the tail of a watchful eye.

"Oh, good evening, Mr. Brackett!" he said. "I—ah—one of these gentlemen is Mr. Brixey, I presume—the Mr. Brixey whose name appears at the foot of the poster?"

"I'm Mr. Brixey," interrupted the signatory. "Will you take a seat, Mr. Felgrave? I suppose you've brought me some news?"

Mr. Felgrave dropped into the arm-chair which Gaffkin pushed forward and glanced at the landlord.

"Well—er—" he said. "I—the fact is, yes—of a private nature. Mr. Brackett knows me, and, of course, he understands that a clergyman has to be—er—very particular, you know, about——"

"I'll leave you to yourselves, gentlemen," said Brackett.

"You've something to tell me about my uncle?" said Brixey.

"Oh, Mr. Linthwaite is your uncle?" said Mr. Felgrave. "Of course, then, you're naturally anxious about him. Now—er—before I say what I can say, do you, would you mind telling me—who is Mr. Linthwaite?"

"Well-known London man," answered Mr. Brixey. Retired solicitor. Somewhat celebrated as an archæologist. Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. Member of two or three other learned societies."

"I should be delighted if anything that I can tell you would relieve your anxiety," said Mr. Felgrave. "I—er—suppose that if I can give information, I should be entitled to——"

"If you can tell me anything that'll lead to the discovery of my uncle, dead or alive, you'll get a hundred pounds," answered Brixey. "And it'll be paid over with as much speed as satisfaction. That's so!"

Mr. Felgrave glanced at the door, assured himself that it was closed, and edged his chair a little nearer to the two men who confronted him from the other side of the hearthrug.

"Mr. Brackett," said Mr. Felgrave, "may have mentioned to you that I am vicar of St. Fridolin's. One of our oldest churches—the very ancient church near the North Bar. The vicarage is that old red-brick house, largely covered with ivy, near the Lame Hussar Inn.

"So, of course, we are very close to the Priory grounds and to the old walls. The walls, as you doubtless know, are a favourite promenade, and the fact is, I have two children. One of them, Nora, is now aged five; the other, Thomas, is aged four. Now, I am a methodical sort of person. I order my day by rule, Mr. Brixey. And for some time, since

my children were of companionable age, and as we do not keep, as yet, a nursery governess—mine is but a poor living—I have made a practice of taking Nora and Thomas out for an hour's walk every morning. We as a rule walk in the Priory grounds. But on Tuesday morning last—you may rely on me for exactitude in dates and times, Mr. Brixey—we walked on the walls.

"In fact, we sat down there—the corporation, some time ago, placed seats on the walls, at certain places overlooking the Priory grounds. And at between a quarter-past and half-past eleven the event took place which I am about to tell you of. Seated where I could look down into the Priory grounds, and, as a matter of fact, immediately facing the ruins of the ancient conventual church, which, you have doubtless noticed, are in a very remarkable state of preservation, I saw one who is, as I have observed, a principal parishioner of mine—Mrs. Byfield. I am not aware if you have heard of her. She is a lady of considerable means, who resides in the Minories."

"We have heard of Mrs. Byfield," said Brixey.

"Just so," remarked Mr. Felgrave. "One of the principal residents of the town. Very well. Mrs. Byfield came into the Priory grounds and walked towards the ruins. She had scarcely reached the point I have just referred to when an elderly gentleman came hurrying after her. He caught her up, raised his hat, and spoke to her.

"There appeared to be mutual recognition, with, I should say, though, of course, I was quite a hundred yards away, some surprise on her part. I have no hesitation, having read and reread the description in your reward bill, Mr. Brixey, in saying that the gentleman was Mr. Linthwaite."

"Yes," said Brixey. "Now—what happened?"

"What occurred was this," replied Mr. Felgrave. "Mrs. Byfield and the stranger walked into the ruins, in, apparently, close and deep conversation. Of course, when they had gone in there, I could not see them any longer.

"But they had not long been removed from my sight when another person came on the scene—from the south entrance to the grounds. It appeared to me that he must have had some appointment with Mrs. Byfield, or with the stranger, for he went straight into the ruins, as if to join one or the other. The fact seemed evident."

"And he was—who?" asked Brixey.

"Not a parishioner of mine, in this case," answered Mr. Felgrave. "A person whom I often see about the town, and whom I know as a Mr. Mesham—yes, a Mr. Christopher Mesham. I have seen his full name on a subscription list. Mr. Mesham, I say, came up and walked into the ruins."

"You didn't see any meeting between him and the other two?" inquired Brixey.

"I did not," replied Mr. Felgrave. "In fact, from my point of view, that would have been a physical impossibility. The walls of the transept—the north transept—formed an impenetrable barrier. But that the three did meet I deduced from the fact that at the end of perhaps ten minutes they all emerged together."

"Aye! And what happened then?" asked Brixey.

"They parted," said Mr. Felgrave. "Mrs. Byfield went away

across the grounds in the direction of a little wicket which admits to the Minories ; Mr. Mesham and the stranger walked together, slowly, towards the postern gate which leads into Foxglove Lane. They passed through it. I saw them no more."

Brixey glanced at Gaffkin and Gaffkin turned to the clergyman.

"I suppose a good many of the townspeople frequent these grounds, sir ?" he asked. "Did you happen to notice if there were many about that morning ?"

"Nursemaids and children and a few old men," responded Mr. Felgrave.

"On the north side of the ruins, where these three could be seen ?" suggested Gaffkin.

"No," replied Mr. Felgrave. "They were on the lawns and gardens on the south side. On the side between the walls and the ruins there was nobody whatever. It was quite deserted."

"Then the probability is that you were the only person who witnessed this meeting ?" said Gaffkin.

"I should say that is so, emphatically," assented Mr. Felgrave. "On that side of the grounds there was no one at all."

"Have you mentioned this to either Mrs. Byfield or Mr. Mesham ?" asked Gaffkin. "Privately, you know ?"

Mr. Felgrave leaned forward in his chair until his lean face was close to his questioners.

"The truth is," he whispered, "I haven't mentioned one syllable of it to a soul—not even to my wife. I haven't said a word until now !"

Brixey took his hands out of his pockets and his pipe out of his mouth, and got up.

"Good !" he said. "Don't. Keep it strictly to yourself. I'm much obliged to you, Mr. Felgrave. You've given us exceedingly valuable information which will probably lead to good results. You'll find me here until my uncle is found or accounted for. And now you'll excuse us, for we've got work to do."

He hustled the visitor out politely but quickly, and hurried back to Gaffkin.

"Come on !" he said. "We're going to act on that—just now."

"Crabbe ?" asked Gaffkin, as he picked up his hat.

"No !" answered Brixey. "The woman !"

CHAPTER X

YOUNG MR. FANSHAW

THE trim parlourmaid who opened the door of the big house in the Minories to Brixey and his companion looked dubious and hesitating when they asked to see her mistress, and kept the door unmistakably closed against them.

"I don't think Mrs. Byfield will see you, sir," she said, lowering her voice and glancing round into the hall behind her. "She—well, she gave orders that if you or Mr. Crabbe called again I was to say she wasn't at home."

Brixey drew out a card and turned to Gaffkin.

"Give me one of your professional cards," he said. "Here," he went on, handing the cards to the girl. "Take those to Mrs. Byfield, and tell her that it's absolutely imperative that we should see her at once. If not, then Mr. Crabbe will have to come himself."

The parlourmaid took the cards with evident reluctance, and went away to the rear of the hall. Brixey and Gaffkin were left on the steps for several minutes. When at last the girl came back, she silently admitted them, and showed them into the parlour in which Brixey and Inspector Crabbe had seen Mrs. Byfield the previous evening.

There they waited still longer—waited until the door was thrown unceremoniously open, and a young man, little more than a boy, and obviously in a high temper, burst in, and flung the callers' cards on the table.

"Now then!" he exclaimed furiously. "What the devil do you fellows mean by forcing your way into my mother's house? Weren't you told that she wasn't at home? What do you mean by threatening her with the police? Do you think you can come bullying people like this? Get out!"

He pulled the door wide and pointed to it threateningly. But Gaffkin remained quietly watching, and Brixey, instead of moving, stood looking calmly at their indignant assailant. A tall, good-looking, slim-figured youngster this, fair-complexioned as a girl, fair-haired, too, with a slightly budding moustache—a mere boy, and very, very angry in a nervous and excited fashion.

His flushed face worked, and the finger which he pointed to the door trembled. And seeing that his orders were not being obeyed, his blue eyes flashed and his lips began to quiver with something that threatened to become rage.

"You hear me!" he said in louder tones. "Get out, before you're thrown out!"

Brixey stepped forward.

"Not yet!" he said quietly. "Mr. Fanshawe Byfield, I presume?"

"And what the devil's my name to you, I should like to know, and who the hell are you?" demanded Fanshawe. "You clear yourself and your damned detective out of this, or——"

"My name is on my card," answered Brixey, pointing to the table. "And you can take your choice between listening politely to me, or having a visit from the police within the next few minutes. No more violence!" he continued, as Fanshawe made a threatening step towards him. "It's mere foolishness."

"Now, Mr. Byfield, you know very well what our business is. I am in search of news of my uncle, Mr. John Linthwaite, who is a man of position, and, since that will probably appeal to you, of considerable wealth. I had reason to believe last night that your mother saw my uncle in the Priory grounds on Tuesday morning, and I came here with Inspector Crabbe and asked her politely if she did. She denied having seen him. I now know—know, mind you—that she not only saw him, but spoke to him for some minutes."

Fanshawe Byfield, whose attitude had grown more threatening as Brixey spoke, drew back a little, and an uneasy look came over his boyish face.

"You know?" he said. "And who the devil told you, Mr. whatever your name is? You tell me that! Some damned liar or other!"

"The damned liar, then, is Mr. Felgrave, the Vicar of St. Fridolin's," answered Brixey. "As to his truthfulness, your mother is, of course, better able to judge than I am."

The lad's jaw dropped, and he moved nearer the open door.

"Felgrave!" he exclaimed. "You say he says——"

"Mr. Felgrave was on the walls overlooking the Priory grounds on Tuesday morning about eleven o'clock," said Brixey. "He saw my uncle, Mr. John Linthwaite, speak to your mother, who evidently recognised him. They entered into conversation, and walked into the ruins together. There they were presently joined by a man who lives in this town—Mr. Mesham."

"What?" said Fanshawe. "Kit Mesham? Rot!"

"Mr. Felgrave," observed Brixey, "appears to me to be a man who is not likely to make mistakes. I have told you what he says he saw, and he is prepared to swear to it."

Fanshawe lifted his hand and began to pull at his tiny moustache. He stood staring sullenly and doubtfully at his unwelcome visitors for a moment, and then suddenly turned to the door.

"Some queer mistake!" he muttered. "I'll—I'll hear what my mother says."

He went out of the room, and Brixey and Gaffkin exchanged glances.

"He knows nothing!" murmured Gaffkin.

"So we'll excuse him," said Brixey. "You're quite right, he knows nothing. Which, in my opinion, heightens the mystery."

Ten minutes went by before Fanshawe came back. The sullen look on his face was still there, and he gave Brixey a furtive, half-deprecating glance as he entered. And this time he carefully closed the door.

"Sorry if I spoke a bit sharply," he said. "The fact is my mother suffers from a weak heart, and I can't have her bothered. She was upset last night by your coming with Crabbe. And—well, I've told her what you say Felgrave says. There's some mistake somewhere—she doesn't know anything about Mr. Linthwaite."

"You mentioned that name last night, and, of course, she didn't know who you were talking about. It's true, however, that she did see a gentleman in the Priory grounds on Tuesday morning. But he was a Mr. Herbert—a man she'd met once or twice, a great many years ago, on the Continent. He came up to her and reminded her that they'd met—at Marseilles. Quite a long time since, but he remembered her. A Mr. Herbert—not your uncle at all. I knew there was some mistake."

"Did Mrs. Byfield mention to you that Mr. Mesham came up and spoke to her and Mr. Herbert?" asked Brixey.

"She says Mesham did come up while she was talking to Mr. Herbert—quite casually," answered Fanshawe. "He and Herbert got discussing the ruins. And they walked away together. That's all she knows."

He stood looking at Brixey as if wondering whether more questions were going to be asked of him. But Brixey suddenly motioned to Gaffkin and turned towards the door.

"I'm much obliged to you, Mr. Byfield," he said. "I hope we

haven't upset your mother. I don't think we shall have to trouble her again."

Fanshawe made no answer, and the callers let themselves out into the street, and had walked some little way before Brixey spoke.

"I say!" he said. "That's a bit of a floorer, Gaffkin! I'm a bit taken aback. What Mrs. Byfield says may be absolutely true, so far as she's personally concerned."

"Yes?" said Gaffkin.

"The truth is," continued Brixey, "until about eighteen or twenty years ago, my uncle's name was Herbert—John Herbert. He took the name of Linthwaite on succeeding to some property left him by a kinsman. So there you are!

"He's always been a regular traveller on the Continent. He may have met this woman years since, in the south of France. She may have remembered him as Mr. Herbert. And in that case I don't see where there's any suspicion against her."

"I'd much rather follow up that man Mesham," observed Gaffkin. "After all, Mr. Brixey, the latest thing we know is that Mr. Linthwaite was last seen in his company."

Brixey pulled out his watch beneath a street lamp.

"Nine-thirty," he said. "Look here, while we're up this end of the town there are some people I'd like to ask a question or two of. Man and his daughter—he's the caretaker of the Priory grounds; the daughter's a bit of a character.

"I got their names from Empidge, the boots at the 'Mitre.' The father's Nat Lee, the daughter Debbie Lee—short for Deborah, I suppose. I'd a bit of a talk to Debbie this morning, and I'd like a bit more. Come along to the Priory."

He led Gaffkin up the street, and round the corner in front of the "Lame Hussar," to the lighted windows of which he pointed as they passed.

"That's where my uncle caught sight of Mrs. Byfield," he remarked. "He was in that bow-window there. He followed her towards these gates. Mrs. Crosse, the landlady there, saw him enter. And, by the by, how are we going to enter? I rather believe these gates are locked at sunset. Never thought of that."

The Priory gates stood in a high wall, up to which, on the left-hand side, and close to the gateway, ran a tall, thick hedgerow of holly and hawthorn. There were two gates—one, wide enough to admit a carriage, was set between pillars; the other, a wicket-gate, was set in the wall itself. Gaffkin tried both.

"Locked!" he said. "Both locked. No getting in there, Mr. Brixey."

"Yet the folks who live inside must get in and out," remarked Brixey. "And I suppose people go to see them now and then? Look if there's a bell. The house in the ruins isn't many yards inside the grounds."

As Gaffkin examined the pillars of the big gate and the wall by the little one, Brixey heard footsteps coming along the narrow street which they had just traversed, and turning round, saw a tall figure cross the full glare of a street lamp in front of the "Lame Hussar." With a sudden sharp movement he laid a hand on Gaffkin's shoulder and drew him through a gap in the hedge that ran up to the angle of the gate.

"H'sh!" he whispered. "Keep quiet! That chap we've just seen—Fanshawe Byfield! Let's see what he's up to."

Fanshawe came rapidly along the deserted street, crossed the bit of open ground which lay in front of the wall, and walked straight up to the wicket-gate. A second later the two watchers heard the click of a key in a lock; then the gate was gently closed, and inside the wall footsteps went rapidly up the drive in the direction of the ruins.

"Mr. Fanshawe Byfield has the right of entry," whispered Brixey. "Um, I think we'll give up this part of the proceedings, Gaffkin. But I'd very much like to know what that youngster's doing in there."

Gaffkin examined his surroundings as well as the light permitted.

"I dare say we could get in if we really wanted to," he observed. "I've climbed stiffer things than this wall when business made it necessary."

"So have I," said Brixey. "But I think not, just now. Let's go back to the 'Mitre'—and on the way we'll have a word with Inspector Crabbe."

CHAPTER XI

A SIDE-TRACK SUGGESTION

As Brixey and Gaffkin turned into the police station, the constable who had acted as intermediary between them and his inspector once or twice, by carrying messages to the "Mitre," came hurrying out and pulled himself up at sight of them.

"Just going to fetch you, sir," he said, looking at Brixey. "Mr. Crabbe would like a word with you. There's a man come in from Normanstead with some news."

He led them down a passage to Crabbe's office, and opening the door, revealed the inspector in conversation with a queer-looking person who sat by the fire, warming a pair of remarkably dirty hands. The callers, inspecting him closely, noted a face tanned by the sun and wind to the colour of mahogany; a pair of sharp, ferrety eyes, and a watchful, half-suspicious expression. They noted too, the man's curious fur cap, evidently of home manufacture, out of the skins of animals, his red plush waistcoat, worn under a soil-stained blue pilot coat, and the gaily-coloured Belcher handkerchief knotted about his sinewy throat. Something about him suggested much outdoor life and the possible excitements of poaching, and Brixey was prepared for Crabbe's introduction.

"One of the people who were camping out on Mardene Moor the other day," said Crabbe, nodding sideways at his queer guest. "Eli Clarke, by trade a tinker. He heard of this business a few hours ago, when he was in Normanstead, and he's come in here to tell something he knows—hoping, of course," he added, with a wink at Brixey, "to get paid for his trouble."

"What do you know?" asked Brixey.

Clarke looked his questioner up and down, and, before replying, pulled a crumpled and dirty copy of the reward bill out of his waistcoat pocket.

"Yourn, guv'nor?" he inquired, pointing to Brixey's name at the foot. "Just so. Then in that case, if anything as I tells you——"

"If anything that you tell me leads to the finding of Mr. Linthwaite," said Brixey, "you'll be well paid for your trouble. So what is it?"

"Not so much, guv'nor," answered Clarke, with a certain amount of ruefulness. "I wish it had been more—I could do with that reward as you offers! All the same, accordin' to him"—here he indicated Inspector Crabbe—"it's more than what's been told by anybody else."

"But it's this—I had my van on Mardene Moor, outside the town there, from last Saturday afternoon to Tuesday night, when I moved off Normanstead way. I was going home'ards, gradual, d'ye see, up Leatherhead direction. Well, now, Tuesday morning, about a quarter to twelve, as near as I can remember, maybe a bit earlier, I was in Foxglove Lane, among the gorse bushes—never mind what for, 'cause it's nothing to do with this."

"I sees two gentlemen coming along from the direction of them Priory grounds, which, as Mr. Crabbe there can tell you, if you don't know yourselves, is at the top o' the lane. Now, in course, I don't know who these gentlemen were—by name, you understand—though I've seen one of 'em, time and again, in Selchester streets. He's a biggish, sporty-looking sort, getting on a bit in years, like, with a moustache what he wears brushed up—fierce, as it were."

"T'other, he was a clean-shaven, oldish gentleman, as wore a suit o' grey clothes and swung a gold-mounted umbrella. I took particular note o' that, and of his gold chain. That, I reckon, guv'nor, is the party as is missing?"

"Well?" said Brixey. "Go on with your story."

"Ain't a deal left in it," continued Clarke. "These here two comes right past where I was in the bushes. They didn't see me, 'cause I took good care they shouldn't. They was talkin' confidential and serious—I could see that. But they was a good twenty yards away, and I couldn't catch a word 'o what they was sayin'."

"However, when they'd passed me a bit, they parted. Him with the umbrella went off across the moor in the direction of that old mill at Mardene, and him with the moustache turned back towards the town by the way they'd come. But when he'd walked past me again a yard or two, he twisted sharp round and called out to the other gent. And that's all I can tell as to what you might call exact words of what I actually heard."

"What did you hear?" demanded Brixey. "Don't make any mistake about it."

"No mistake, guv'nor. It was only a word or two," said the tinker. "Him with the moustache called out: 'I say!' he says. 'You'd better make it two-thirty. That'll give me more time,' he says. T'other gent nodded. 'Very well,' he calls. 'I'll be there—two-thirty.' Then they both went their ways, and, of course, I went mine. And that's all, gentlemen, whatever it's worth."

Brixey turned from his informant to Crabbe, who motioned him and Gaffkin to step aside.

"Before this man came in," he said, in a whisper, "I had some news which seems to confirm his statement—from Mardene. A gentleman

who I haven't the slightest doubt was Mr. Linthwaite got a bit of cold lunch at the village inn there at one o'clock on Tuesday and set off, three-quarters of an hour later, in the direction of Selchester.

"Now, that appears to be the very last bit of information. The thing now is, where did Mr. Linthwaite go at half-past two? And was the other man whom he was to meet Mr. Mesham?"

"Of course!" answered Brixey. "We know it was Mesham. Here, let me give this man something for his trouble, and arrange with him about further reward if his information leads to anything, and then Gaffkin and I will tell you all we've learnt this evening."

Crabbe's eyes grew larger and his face graver as he heard Brixey's account of the evening's proceedings, and in the end he shook his head and fell into a deep silence, which the other two did not interrupt.

"I don't like this, gentlemen," he said at last. "Mesham's a stranger in this town. He's only been here two years, and nobody knows anything about him, nor where his means come from, nor anything!"

"And he's deep; why, he was chatting to me in the street about this affair early this evening, and he never breathed a syllable about having met Mr. Linthwaite. Instead, he suggested that he'd disappeared because he wanted to. I don't like it at all!"

"The situation is this," observed Brixey. "We now know, on the evidence of Mr. Felgrave, and by the admission of Mrs. Byfield, through her son, that Mesham met my uncle in the Priory grounds on Tuesday morning and walked down Foxglove Lane with him."

"We also know, from what this tinker chap has just told us, that my uncle made an appointment with Mesham for half-past two, and that he set out from Mardene at a quarter to two to keep it. There the trail ends. Now, then, it seems to me that there's only one thing to do, inspector. How does it strike you?"

"You're right, sir," said Crabbe. "There is only one thing to do. We must go at once, and insist on Mesham telling us where he was to meet Mr. Linthwaite, and if he did meet him. Come round to his rooms, gentlemen—they're close by."

He took Brixey and Gaffkin down the street until they came to a point where a narrow alley turned off in the direction of the cathedral close—there, at the corner of the main street and the alley, stood a saddler's shop, with the name Strike over it in gilt letters on a powder-blue ground. Crabbe pointed to some lighted windows on the first floor.

"Those are Mesham's rooms," he said. "He has the whole floor—very comfortable, too, I can assure you! He knows how to look after himself. I've been in here more than once."

"Mr. Mesham in?" he asked, as a smart young woman answered his ring at the door bell. "Just ask him to see me, if you please—important business. I wish," he added in a whisper, as the three men waited in the passage, "that we could have caught him unawares. He'll be prepared now."

Mesham, prepared or not, certainly revealed a brilliant unconcern. They found him in a comfortably furnished sitting-room, lounging in a deep easy chair in a smoking jacket and crimson morocco slippers; a bright fire at his toes, a spirit-case and mineral waters at his elbow; a cigar of fine aroma between his teeth.

He took it out unconcernedly as the three entered, and while he nodded half-condescendingly to Crabbe, gave no more than a supercilious glance of recognition to the others.

"Didn't know you'd got a bodyguard, Crabbe," he drawled. "But as you have, what the devil is it all about?"

Crabbe advanced to a table which filled the centre of the room, and, resting the tips of his fingers on it, leaned forward with a keen look.

"Mr. Mesham," he said, "this Linthwaite affair. We've had information to-night which proves that you know something about it. I'll just tell you what it is, and then—well, then I should like to know what you've got to say.

"Now," he concluded, after summarising what Mr. Felgrave and the tinker had told, "what do you say to that, Mr. Mesham? You see how serious it is!"

Mesham, who had shown no sign of either surprise or uneasiness while Crabbe was speaking, and had watched him steadily throughout, sneered visibly as he glanced from him to his companions.

"I'll tell you what I say, Crabbe," he answered. "And in a few words, too! I can mind my own business as well as any man. And I'm going to!"

"You don't deny what Mr. Felgrave says, nor what Clarke says?" asked Crabbe uneasily.

"Not for a minute. Quite right, both of 'em," replied Mesham.

"Did you meet Mr. Linthwaite somewhere at two-thirty that day?" inquired Crabbe.

Mesham's lip curled in a more pronounced sneer.

"Now that is my business!" he said with emphasis.

"You won't tell?" asked Crabbe.

"Certainly not!" retorted Mesham.

Crabbe glanced at Brixey, and Brixey moved nearer the defiant figure in the arm-chair.

"You don't care anything about my personal anxiety?" he asked.

Mesham let his eyes turn in Brixey's direction for a second.

"Not a damn!" he answered. "Why should I?"

Brixey drew back again, and Mesham, after another sneering look at him, turned to Crabbe.

"Look here, Crabbe!" he said. "How do you know what business Linthwaite had with me, or if we're to mention names, with Mrs. Byfield? Go away, and think over that. You're building up a mare's nest, and Linthwaite'll be dropping right on top of it! See?"

Brixey touched Crabbe's elbow.

"Come away!" he said: "We're wasting time here."

CHAPTER XII

THE FAMILY SOLICITOR

MESHAM twisted sharply in his chair and gave Brixey an equally sharp glance.

"You're quite right, my friend," he said calmly. "You are wasting time."

Crabbe seemed to follow the other two with anything but willingness, and in the street he hesitated, as if uncertain whether to go forward or back.

"There may be something in what he said just then, Mr. Brixey," he observed, shaking his head. "How do we know that your uncle didn't go away, suddenly, on Tuesday on some secret business? One thing's now very evident to me—there's some queer mystery in all this, and Mr. Linthwaite's mixed up in it.

"So's Mesham, and so, in all likelihood, is Mrs. Byfield. Mr. Linthwaite may have gone off at a moment's notice. He could have gone unobserved, too. Ours is a very busy station. Who'd have taken any particular notice of an elderly gentleman?"

"All wrong," said Brixey. "You're forgetting something. I had certain arrangements with my uncle. Whatever new ones he made he would have acquainted me with. That man we've just seen is a bold liar. Also, you forget another matter on which you previously laid a good deal of stress. If Mr. Linthwaite had left the town on sudden and secret business, how came his hat and umbrella to be left behind in Foxglove Lane? Come on, Gaffkin."

He walked away up the street without waiting an answer from Crabbe, and remained silent until he and Gaffkin were entering the courtyard of the "Mitre." There he paused and tapped his companion's arm.

"Look here!" he said. "I'm going on my own lines henceforth. No more truck with the police. Crabbe's no good. We'll solve this matter in our own way. Now listen. You'll catch the first train to town in the morning. It leaves here just after seven; make your arrangements to-night.

"You know my uncle and I live in rooms in the Temple—of course, you've been there. Go there, Gaffkin. Here's my key. Examine his papers—you'll find a desk full, and some boxes full, too, in his room. They're locked, of course. Call a locksmith in.

"Go right through everything, and see if you can find anything in which either of the names Byfield or Mesham is mentioned.

"Leave nothing unexamined. Put yourself up in the rooms until you've gone through everything, and then get back here. Meanwhile, I'll carry out a notion of my own. You understand?"

"All right," said Gaffkin, "I've a pretty good idea of what there is to examine. I can get through it in a couple of days, so you ought to see me back here on Monday morning—perhaps on Sunday evening. I'll arrange about being called."

He went up the yard to a room wherein Empidge carried out his duties as boots and general factotum, and Brixey turned into the hotel. Brackett caught sight of him, and came out of the bar parlour.

"Glad you've come in, sir," he said. "Mr. Semmerby, of Semmerby and Askill, the solicitors, has just been round here wanting to see you. He's been away at Brighton for a few days, and only came home to-night, and as soon as he heard of what's going on, and saw the reward bill, he came along.

"He's anxious to help, Mr. Brixey. He says he's met Mr. Linthwaite once or twice in London, and he's much concerned. He asked if you could see him as soon as you got in."

"To be sure," answered Brixey. "Where does he live?"

Brackett led him out to the entrance of the courtyard, and pointed along the now deserted street.

"Straight along this side until you've passed St. Benet's Church, sir," he said. "Then, just before you come to West Bar, you'll see an old house standing a bit back from the street. That's Mr. Semmerby's—his private residence, of course."

Brixey went off in the direction indicated. In a few minutes he found himself in an old-fashioned dining-room, the furniture and ornaments of which suggested early Victorian days, confronting an inquisitive-eyed, benevolent-looking old gentleman who regarded him with great interest.

"I was very much concerned to hear this news about Mr. Linthwaite," he said, as he pressed his visitor into an easy chair, and silently offered him refreshment from certain things on the table.

"I met Mr. Linthwaite four or five years ago in the course of business; in fact, I lunched with him once or twice in town. We had tastes—antiquarian tastes—in common. So you're his nephew? I hope you've some news of him by now, Mr. Brixey?"

"No good news," answered Brixey. "In fact, I'm getting more and more puzzled and bothered about the whole thing. I'm much obliged to you, Mr. Semmerby, for coming round to the 'Mitre.' You may be able to give me the very help I want."

The old lawyer dropped into a chair at his visitor's side, and put the tips of his fingers together.

"Tell me all about it," he said. "Remember, I don't know anything beyond mere common gossip. I haven't been home more than an hour. I've just heard what my housekeeper could tell, and seen your handbill. Of course, you know much more?"

"Not so much," replied Brixey. "I'll tell you it all—in order, as things have developed since I became acquainted with them."

"Now," he concluded, after giving his host a lucid and straightforward account of his doings, from the visit of Georgina Byfield to the *Sentinel* office to the end of the call upon Mesham, "that's as far as things have gone. What, as a professional man, do you say to all that, Mr. Semmerby?"

"One thing, immediately," answered the old lawyer. "Mesham will have to tell if he did meet Linthwaite at two-thirty on Tuesday; where he met him; and where he left him. That's flat."

"Aye," said Brixey. "But who'll make him?"

"Public opinion," affirmed Semmerby.

"From what I've seen of Mesham," remarked Brixey, "I should say he's as utterly indifferent to public opinion as he is to private feeling."

Semmerby shook his head.

"I wonder if you can tell me something?" said Brixey.

"I'll tell you anything I can that would help you," answered Semmerby.

"Do you know if Mesham knew Mrs. Byfield before he came to Selchester?" asked Brixey.

The old lawyer reflected in silence for a few minutes before he replied

to this. When he spoke it was with a shake of the head which Brixey understood to suggest indecision more than denial.

"If he did," he answered, "it's unknown to me. That Mesham knows the Byfields, and visits them, I know. But I fancy, at least, I always understood, that it was through Fanshawe that he began going to the house. They belong to the same club—the Selchester Club. Fanshawe Byfield has a very good billiard table at the house in the Minories—he's a great player; so is Mesham. I think that's the bond. Of course, through going to the house to play billiards with the son, Mesham knows the mother."

"If Mesham was an absolute stranger when he came to this town two years ago," asked Brixey, "how did he manage to get elected a member of the Selchester Club?"

"Good question!" said the old lawyer with a smile. "Well, he'd been in the town some time—some months—then. He'd got to know two or three sportsmen, met them at the 'Mitre,' or the 'Cavalier,' or at the cricket ground. Some of them put him up, and, as his means were evident, and the tradesfolk spoke well of him, and as they're not very particular at the club—why, he was elected."

"The truth is, Mr. Semmerby," remarked Brixey, "nobody knows who the man is?"

"Quite so," agreed Semmerby.

"I mean to know," said Brixey. "And," he added, with a resolute look, "I mean to know who somebody else in Selchester is, too!"

"Who?" asked the old lawyer.

"Mrs. Byfield," replied Brixey.

Semmerby looked his visitor carefully over.

"You think there's some mystery about her which may be connected with your uncle's disappearance?" he asked.

"Frankly, I do!" assented Brixey. "I'm certain of it."

"Well," said Semmerby, "I may as well tell you that I'm the Byfield family solicitor."

"Are you?" exclaimed Brixey. "Glad to hear it! Then—do you know who she is—which really means who she was?"

"No more than that she was a young or youngish widow, named Mrs. Sunderland, when my late client, Martin Byfield, met her at, I think, Nice, where she was in charge—to put it plainly—of an English tea-room—manageress, you know," replied Semmerby.

"She came to Europe from New Zealand, where her first husband had died. That's all I can tell, except that there's a man here in the town, Wetherby, Martin Byfield's old valet, who saw his master married to her at Monaco. I don't think there's any mystery about Mrs. Byfield."

"You won't think me impertinent if I ask if these Byfields are very wealthy?" inquired Brixey.

"It's well known," answered Semmerby. "Those things do get known, especially in small places like this. Martin Byfield, who, by the by, died intestate, left about two hundred thousand pounds, almost entirely in personal property. Of course, the widow administered. She took one-third, and the son takes the other two-thirds. That reminds me. He comes of age during this next week. A very wealthy young man, and, I'm sorry to say, a very weak one."

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But Brixey appeared to have no interest in young Mr. Fanshawe Byfield's character, and presently he went away, promising to keep Mr. Semmerby informed if any news came to hand.

CHAPTER XIII

THE POSTER AND THE TELEGRAM

BRIXEY lay awake through half that night, thinking. He had endeavoured since his schoolboy days to foster and develop habits of clear thought, but he was bound to admit, as he lay tossing restlessly about, hearing the cathedral clock strike one hour after another, that his mental processes on this occasion were anything but clear.

It was an unrefreshing and unquiet slumber, from which he was aroused by a gentle tap at his door.

"Just off," whispered Gaffkin, putting his head inside. "Anything more you wish to tell me?"

Brixey had the faculty of coming wide-awake at any time, with all his wits about him.

"Oh, well!" he answered. "Just this. If you find any letters at our rooms, send 'em on. I forgot to leave instructions about that. That's all. Be thorough in your search, Gaffkin."

Gaffkin nodded, withdrew his head, and went quietly away. Brixey pulled his watch from under his pillow, and finding that half-past six had arrived, got out of bed and drew up his blinds. Opposite his window, at the corner of the street, was a newsagent's shop. The newsagent himself, having evidently been down to the station to fetch the first editions of the London morning newspapers, was now busied in putting up their contents-bills at his door.

Brixey, thrusting his hands in the pockets of his pyjama jacket, stood lazily and indifferently watching him. But that watching gave him an idea, and suddenly he dived into his suit-case, dragged out a notebook and a pencil, and standing at a chest of drawers, began to write.

When he had finished writing he propped the sheet of paper on which he had written against the mirror on his dressing-table, and, while he shaved and dressed, he read it over and over again, and every time he read he laughed.

The printer round the corner was behind his shop-counter when Brixey strolled in upon him at eight o'clock.

"Another job for you," said Brixey, laying down his sheet of paper. "See that? Read it."

The printer read and whistled.

"Whew!" he said. "There isn't anything you think that could be taken as a libel, sir? The law's so queer about printing statements that——"

"It's all right—pure statement of undisputed fact," answered Brixey. "The person named there admitted that much to Inspector Crabbe, to me, and to a friend of mine last night. Pure fact! But I mean to go further.

"Now look here. I want you to make a dozen big, staring placards

of that—great big letters, as bold as possible. Then paste the placards on boards, and let a dozen men parade the streets round the Cross there with them, from, say, eleven to one o'clock. Can you get men?"

"I can get a dozen men if you make it worth their while," said the printer.

"Give 'em five shillings apiece," commanded Brixey, pulling out his money. "Now listen. Let them start out from here at eleven, and walk up and down for two hours in the centre of the town. Isn't it your market-day?"

"One of them—we've two here," assented the printer. "This is the town market-day."

"It's the townsfolk I want to startle," said Brixey. "All right. Go ahead. There's a fiver—we'll settle things later in the morning. But, eleven sharp, mind!"

The printer picked up the copy and the bank-note and vanished into his composing room, and Brixey lounged back to the "Mitre" and ate a big breakfast.

When that was over he did more lounging in the private room, adjacent to his own sitting-room, in which Miss Georgina Byfield, under Mr. Brackett's superintendence, kept the books and wrote the letters—and she and the old landlord were not a little surprised to find that, for the first time since his arrival, Brixey avoided reference to the cause of his coming to Selchester. He had evidently no wish to talk of Mr. Linthwaite that morning.

Instead, he talked of any trifling matter that arose. But as eleven o'clock struck he motioned Brackett to follow him out of the house and to the entrance to the courtyard.

"Come and see something," he said laconically, as he glanced up the street towards the printer's. "There, out to the minute! Now, then, what do you think of that for a demonstration in force?"

Twelve men emerged in silent and solemn procession from the court at the side of the printing office, and, with intervals of a few yards between each, marched erect and businesslike down the side of the pavement. Each carried in front of him a large board, on which was pasted a placard, its lettering bold enough to be read from across the street.

Brixey, admiring his own design, chuckled as he saw that the printer, generously entering into the spirit of the thing, had printed the announcement in two colours, using red and black ink with striking effect.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the old landlord. "Your work, of course, sir!"

"Aye!" said Brixey. "Pretty notice, isn't it?"

Brackett adjusted his glasses as the placard-bearers drew nearer, and audibly read over the wording which Brixey had concocted in the early hours.

**"FIVE HUNDRED POUNDS REWARD!
SPOT CASH**

"MITRE HOTEL, SELCHESTER.

"The offer of £100 made yesterday by Mr. Richard Brixey for news of his uncle, Mr. John Linthwaite, is now increased to the above amount, which will be paid to any person who first gives

reliable information leading to the finding of Mr. Linthwaite, alive or dead. Mr. Linthwaite, it is now known, arranged to meet

MR. CHRISTOPHER MESHAM

at half-past two o'clock last Tuesday afternoon.

DID THEY MEET ? ”

“ Bless my soul ! ” repeated Brackett. “ What will Mesham say to that ? He'll—gad, sir, if that doesn't force him to something ! Here, I'll get a copy of that to hang up in the bar, Mr. Brixey. Publicity, eh, sir—you believe in it ? ”

Brixey laughed, and, without replying, strolled slowly down the street after the line of placard-bearers. The town was just then filling with the usual Saturday morning crowd, and within a few minutes every other person was thronging the edges of the sidewalks to read the staring red-and-black.

Brixey, secure in his incognito, enjoyed himself by hearing the comments and inquiries, and suddenly he saw Mesham emerge from a tobacconist's shop, face to face with the first of the twelve stolid-faced processionists.

Mesham caught his own name glaring at him in great red letters, and his start of annoyed surprise was visible. His face flamed as scarlet as the printer's ink, and before any of those standing near had noticed his sudden appearance, he lifted the heavy, steel-ended stick which he carried and rushed on the placard-bearer, to find Brixey's square shoulders in front of him.

“ My employees, Mr. Mesham,” said Brixey quietly. “ No interference ! ”

Mesham glared and glanced and drew back. The procession in the gutter moved on.

“ Damn you ! ” he growled beneath his tightened lips. “ Your work ! I'll make you pay for this. I'll go to the police. I'll——”

“ Mere statement of fact,” remarked Brixey, pointing to the last placard. “ You admitted it to Crabbe last night. Now, did you meet my uncle ? ”

“ Go to hell ! ” hissed Mesham, moving off in the direction of the police station.

“ You,” said Brixey, quietly sidling up to Mesham's side, “ are in a very fair way of going to jail. Listen—these men will parade the streets for two hours, unless their presence leads to a riot. But they'll have done their effective work long before that—in fact, they've done it now.

“ Now then, if before one o'clock you haven't told me whether or not you met Mr. Linthwaite last Tuesday at two-thirty, and if you did, what happened,—and where he is, this little dodge of mine is as nothing—nothing !—to my next manœuvre against you. Now go and see Crabbe.”

He turned on his heel without as much as another glance at Mesham, and walked slowly back towards the “ Mitre,” careless of the wondering and inquisitive looks of certain folk who had witnessed the scene on the sidewalk.

But at the point where the four main streets of the town intersected

he met Mr. Semmerby, who had evidently crossed from the "Mitre," and who shook his head half gravely, half whimsically, at sight of him.

"Brackett," remarked the old lawyer, "has just shown me your poster. Ah, there, I see," he added as the procession of placard-bearers came back along their first tracks, "there are your emissaries! A bold experiment, my dear young man! Your notion, of course, is to force Mesham's hand?"

"My notion, sir," answered Brixey, with a grim look, "is to force the truth out of him. I'll give him no peace until he tells if he did meet my uncle last Tuesday, and what he knows of his subsequent movements."

He paused, feeling a tap on his elbow, and turning, found Empidge standing there holding out a telegram.

"Just come for you, sir," said Empidge. "I saw you standing here, so I ran across with it."

Brixey excused himself to the old solicitor, and turning away, read the message. As he expected, it was from Gaffkin:

Found following telegram here addressed to you. Housekeeper says was delivered last Thursday afternoon at four-thirty: "Newhaven.—Obliged to run over to Paris on urgent business for a few days, so cannot meet you Winchester to-morrow. Will wire you next Tuesday or Wednesday to White Hart, Salisbury, as to time of my return.—Linthwaite."

CHAPTER XIV

THE HOLOGRAPH MESSAGE

BRIXEY read this message twice over, excused himself again to Mr. Semmerby and, moving away, beckoned to Empidge, who was waiting behind him.

"Got a local time table?" he asked.

The boots produced a much-thumbed railway guide, and Brixey, running through its pages, quickly memorised the information he needed.

"Look here!" he said, handing back the guide. "Tell Mr. Brackett I'm going to be away during the afternoon. I shall be back at the 'Mitre' just about seven this evening."

"Now, another thing. You know Rollinson, the printer? Go to him, and tell him that Mr. Brixey says he can withdraw those men who are carrying the placards at twelve o'clock, or sooner, if—but only if—Mr. Crabbe asks him to do so. That's all, except that I shall want dinner when I get back."

He hurried away down the street and went off to the station, where he presently caught an eastward-bound train. And all the way to Newhaven he was wondering and speculating about the exact meaning and significance of Gaffkin's wire.

That the repeated wire purporting to originate from Mr. Linthwaite was really genuine Brixey did not believe for one moment. He knew his uncle well enough to feel sure that if circumstances had arisen necessitating an alteration in his plans he would not only have wired more explicitly, but have supplemented the telegram by a letter giving details.

The telegram quoted by Gaffkin was, in Brixey's opinion, a fraud, and, as he had said, a clumsy one, and a feature in what he was rapidly coming to consider a strange and mysterious conspiracy. It had been sent to him as a blind, in his uncle's name, in order to throw him off a possible scent.

Yet there were certain facts to be faced, and Brixey put these to himself in the form of questions, revolving each in turn as the train carried him along the Sussex coast line. Some person who was not Mr. Linthwaite had sent the message which Gaffkin had found on arriving in London. So how had that person obtained Brixey's private address?

How did that person know that he, Brixey, had arranged to meet Mr. Linthwaite at Winchester last Friday morning? Why was Tuesday or Wednesday in the coming week mentioned as a probable date for Mr. Linthwaite to communicate again with his nephew?

Finally, why was it necessary to put him, Brixey, into the position of believing that Mr. Linthwaite's arrangements were so altered that there would be no meeting between uncle and nephew for at least four and possibly five days?

Before he reached Brighton and changed into a local train for Newhaven, Brixey had worked out certain conclusions, which, when he reconsidered them, seemed obvious enough. First, whoever had sent the wire from Newhaven was in touch with Mr. Linthwaite. Second, Mr. Linthwaite had without doubt furnished, of his own will or under pressure, the address of the rooms in the Temple which he and his nephew shared. Third, the obvious intention of the wire was that Brixey, for some days at any rate, should have no uneasiness or wonder as to his uncle's whereabouts.

He was to be under the comfortable impression that Mr. Linthwaite had, for some reason or other, altered his arrangements; that they were to meet at the "White Hart" at Salisbury some days later than they had meant to meet at Winchester, and that their projected holiday together would then begin.

So, what did it all mean?

Brixey got the solution of the mystery in a flash as he stood nibbling a sandwich and sipping a cup of coffee in the refreshment room at Brighton during a ten minutes' wait.

Kidnapped!

While he journeyed round through Lewes to Newhaven, Brixey did more thinking. He tried to reconstruct things. Mr. Linthwaite goes to Selchester, intent on no more than amusing and interesting himself in its antiquities, among which he means to idle a few days pleasantly away.

By sheer accident, he lights on some people he has known. One is Mrs. Byfield; the other is Mr. Christopher Mesham, the Mr. X of another period. What secret of theirs, or of hers, does he discover? Was it a mutual secret? Was it the secret of one only? Did it come to the surface, just when it was not wanted, when the three met in the old ruins that morning? Did Mr. Linthwaite already know it? Or did he only become acquainted with it at that meeting?

Anyway, in Brixey's opinion, what had happened was this—these people had a secret, and a design in hand arising out of it which would be absolutely smashed up if Mr. Linthwaite was allowed to remain at large

with power to use his knowledge of the secret ; therefore he was cleverly and quietly trapped, until the moment came whereat that knowledge would be useless.

And, evidently, from the trick of the telegram, that time was limited to four or five days—certainly to within a week. Therefore, whatever it was that these people were doing, they were doing it now. Now—just now.

Brixey left the train at Newhaven town station and walked up to the post office. He had to wait some little time before the clerk was found who had taken in the telegram about which he had called, but thereafter he had no difficulty in getting his first piece of information. The telegram had not been handed in over the counter at all, but telephoned from an hotel in the town.

"Man's voice or woman's?" asked Brixey.

"Man's—I should say a young man's," answered the clerk.

"You've an arrangement, I suppose, by which the hotel people or people staying there can telephone messages up to you for transmission by telegram?" suggested Brixey.

"Just so," said the clerk. "Often done."

Brixey went off to the hotel. He was on the track of something, and of somebody ; the next thing was to discover who the person was who had come to Newhaven in order to send that designedly misleading message.

Would the hotel folk, who no doubt saw a great many people, be likely to remember any particular person who had been there, perhaps only for a few minutes, two days before?

He was encouraged in his hopes by finding that the hotel was a small one. He walked into the coffee-room, that was otherwise unoccupied, and, finding that it was already past three o'clock, rang the bell and asked for tea. While the waitress went for it he sat down and reflected on his next movement.

He was anxious not to excite undue interest, for he was by that time convinced that he had to do with a conspiracy, and he did not know how far its ramifications might extend. For anything he knew to the contrary, one of the persons concerned in it might live in Newhaven, might use that very house regularly. It was, in any case, necessary to proceed with caution.

From sheer habit when stranded in such surroundings and being one of those people who can think of one thing and read about another at the same time, Brixey looked round for a newspaper.

Then he saw one close at his knee ; someone had carelessly thrown the *Daily Express* on top of a big waste-paper basket which stood between his easy-chair and the corner of the fender. He leaned forward and picked it up, and the next instant found himself staring at a scrap of paper on which part of his own name and address was plainly written. And—in Mr. Linthwaite's familiar caligraphy!

Brixey had already experienced too much of it not to believe in luck. He had known several strokes of luck—luck so extraordinary as to be almost miraculous. And he knew that here, once more, his luck was with him again. By sheer, good, absolute luck he was on the verge of a discovery.

Before placing even the tip of a finger on it, he bent over the basket and looked narrowly at its contents. He saw at once that they had been

accumulating there for days. He saw, too, what had happened in the case of the scrap of paper on which Mr. Linthwaite's writing appeared.

Someone, probably sitting in that very chair, probably waiting as he was, for a cup of tea, had torn up a half-sheet of notepaper into small pieces, and had then dropped the pieces, in a solid sheaf, into the basket.

Having arrived at that conclusion, Brixey carefully took the pieces out, made sure that there were no more of them, and put them, unsorted, into his pocket.

The tea came. Once more he had the room to himself. He drew a chair to the table, poured out a cup of tea, lighted a cigarette, and examined his find, laying each scrap of paper on the cloth. Then he counted them. Thirty-two in all.

He knew then what had happened. The destroyer had half a sheet of notepaper. He had torn it in two—torn it again—repeated the process three times after that, until the one piece had become thirty-two pieces. All right—the thirty-two pieces were there; all that was necessary was to put them carefully together.

There was no great difficulty in the task, granted that whoever essayed it was possessed of patience and aptitude. In ten minutes Brixey had brought it to a successful conclusion, and had the tangible result before him. And he was then more surprised than ever.

There were two messages on the half-sheet of paper, and each was in a different handwriting. One, written evidently rather hastily in pencil, was in the handwriting of Mr. Linthwaite; the other, in ink, was in a hand quite unfamiliar to Brixey.

What Mr. Linthwaite had written was this :

Brixey, 851c, King's Bench Walk, Temple, E.C.—Obliged alter arrangements for few days. Meet me White Hart, Salisbury, next Wednesday evening.—Linthwaite.

All of this, except the address, had been crossed out in ink. Underneath the unknown hand had written another message :

Newhaven.—Obliged to run over to Paris on urgent business for a few days, so cannot meet you Winchester to-morrow. Will wire you next Tuesday or Wednesday to White Hart, Salisbury, as to time of my return.—Linthwaite.

This, of course, was identical, word for word, with the wire which Gaffkin had quoted to Brixey in his own wire of that morning. The variation from the original message had, of course, been made with a purpose, and—

The waitress entered the room at that moment, bringing some hot toast, and Brixey, after a sharp, observant glance at her, determined on a bold stroke. He motioned her to put the door to, and lowered his voice to a whisper.

"Look here!" he said, with a meaning look. "Would you like to earn a sovereign?"

CHAPTER XV

THE VEILED WOMAN

HAD Brixey invited the waitress to lead a white elephant in chains through the streets of Newhaven she could scarcely have looked more astonished than she did on hearing this question. Seeing her astonishment, he hastened to make matters more plain to her.

"Nothing much!" he said reassuringly. "I just want you to tell me something, if you can. This is Saturday. Now, the day before yesterday, Thursday—do you remember any strangers coming in here, in the afternoon, between, say, two o'clock and four, or something of that sort?"

The girl's face cleared, and she nodded her head with an emphatic gesture.

"There was a gentleman in, about three o'clock," she said. "He had a cup of tea. But he came in to use our telephone."

"Ah!" said Brixey. "To use your telephone. Where's that, now?"

"At the end of the hall, by the bar," answered the waitress. "He wanted to telephone a message to the post office—he paid the landlord for it."

"Oh!" remarked Brixey. "Now, what sort of gentleman—old or young?"

"Well," replied the waitress, after thoughtful reflection, "I should say he'd be thirty or so."

"Quite a stranger, I suppose?" suggested Brixey.

"I never saw him before," said the girl. "But I've only been here a year. Perhaps," she added, "the landlord, Mr. Marrows, could tell you more about him. Has he—has he been doing something?"

"Ah!" said Brixey, with a warning look. "It's a very mysterious case. However, here's the little present I promised you. Now, then," he added, as he slipped a sovereign into the girl's hand, "where is Mr. Marrows?"

The waitress, evidently as delighted with the mystery as with its results to herself, conducted Brixey to the bar parlour at the rear of the hall, where an elderly man sat reading the newspaper to the accompaniment of a cigar. He looked over the top of his spectacles as the girl ushered Brixey in.

"Gentleman wants to speak to you, Mr. Marrows," she said, and turned away with obvious reluctance.

Brixey nodded confidentially to the landlord and sat down by him.

"A little private business, between you and me, of the detective sort," said Brixey, assuming a still more mysterious air than he had manifested to the damsel. "I've just heard from your waitress what I wanted—and expected—to find. On Thursday afternoon you'd a man in here who used your telephone to send a wire to the post office. He paid you for it?"

"Left half a crown for it—they collect from the post office," assented the landlord. "Told me to give the change to the girl, which I did."

"Just so," said Brixey. "You didn't know the man?"

"Not from Adam," answered Mr. Marrows. "Not any more than I know you."

Brixey pulled out a card and laid it on the table.

"That's who I am," he said. "Now, that message which the man sent off from here was to me—I have the copy of it in my pocket. And I want to find out who he was. There's a great deal depends on it, Mr. Marrows. I gather from what your waitress says that he was a stranger here?"

"Absolute, mister! Never saw the man in my life before," declared the landlord. "And I've been in this house five-and-twenty years. I've a good memory for faces, too."

"Then you can remember, since it's only forty-eight hours since he was here, what this chap was like?" suggested Brixey.

"Very ordinary," said the landlord. "I should ha' set him down as a commercial, or a clerk, or something of that sort, mister. Dark clothes, billycock hat, bit of a black moustache—very ordinary, such as you might meet by the dozen, you know."

"However, I did notice one thing about him that's not so very usual, when all's said and done."

"What was that?" asked Brixey.

"Had a queer cast in one eye—the left one," answered the landlord. "Gave him a—a—what's that word, now?"

"A sinister look?" suggested Brixey.

"You're right," agreed Mr. Marrows. "A sinister look! Seemed to be looking at you sort of fixed-like with one optic while the other roved round. I never trust that sort. Not as it can be helped, I suppose—born so, no doubt."

"And that's all you know of him?" asked Brixey.

"All!" said the landlord. "Excepting that he came in here, had a cup of tea and a bit of toast or the like, used our telephone, and treated me to a drop of whisky and a cigar before he went out. Left to catch the four-eleven train."

Brixey followed the mysterious stranger's example by inviting Mr. Marrows to the refreshment specified. But he got no further information.

When he, too, presently caught the four-eleven, all he knew was that a very ordinary-looking individual, only distinguished from the ruck by an optical infirmity, had somehow become possessed of Mr. Linthwaite's real message to himself, and had, at his own pleasure, or at the dictation of some other person, so altered it as to endeavour to make him, Brixey, believe that Mr. Linthwaite was on his way, via Newhaven and Dieppe, to Paris.

"A concocted job!" mused Brixey, as he set off on his return journey to Selchester. "How many of them are in at it? And is this squinting person a principal or an agent—a cat's-paw? And how am I to find him?"

This was a question not to be answered by speculation, and Brixey

occupied himself for the remainder of his two hours' journey by considering larger issues. By this time he had come to a supplementary conclusion—the thing at the bottom of all this mystery was money. But whose money? What money?

He began to reflect upon all he had heard of money in connection with it. Martin Byfield had left Georgina, his niece, no money. He had not made any will about his own money; at any rate, if he had, no will had ever been brought to light. Had Mr. Linthwaite's disappearance anything to do with these two matters?

Again, as regards money, Mr. Linthwaite had been in the habit of paying Mesham, as Mr. X., so much money every six months. Had that fact any relation to his disappearance? And yet, again, Mr. Semmerby had casually mentioned the fact that within a few days young Fanshawe Byfield would come of age and into a fortune—a big one. Had that any relation to the Linthwaite mystery?

After all, Mr. Linthwaite was a solicitor, if a retired one. It might be—nay, must be—that he had professional secrets of which he, Brixey, knew and could know nothing whatever.

Supposing that his evidently accidental meeting with Mrs. Byfield and Mesham brought up one of those secrets and led to these apparently mysterious events, might not the explanation, when it came, be a remarkably simple one? He was bound to confess that it might.

But, in spite of that, he was going on—the intuitive feeling that something was wrong was too powerful to be resisted. He had set out to find his uncle, and he was going to find him. His zeal might be misplaced, but Brixey's way was to go through with things.

He was back at the "Mitre" before seven, and at once sought out Brackett, eager for news. Nothing had happened. The placard men had patrolled the streets until noon, when, in accordance with Brixey's orders, the printer had withdrawn them. But the one hour's publicity had been amply sufficient, said Brackett. The whole town was talking about the affair.

And, whether it had anything to do with it or not, a young fellow who drove a motor-car from Stillwick's garage had told Empidge that he would like to see Mr. Brixey that evening, but wouldn't say why. Empidge had told him to call later on.

"Bring him in—any time," said Brixey. "Any telegrams for me?"

He had hoped to hear something more from Gaffkin. But there was nothing, and nothing had come by the time he had eaten his dinner. He sat down then to write more copy for the *Sentinel*. This time he was going further; Monday's *Sentinel* should have a column, a whole column, with rousing cross-headings, of startling news. He was busied in this way when nine o'clock came, and the old landlord entered with a significant air which suggested mystery.

"There's a woman, heavily veiled, outside in the yard," he whispered. "Wants to see you on the placard business. But she's evidently frightened to death of being seen, and doesn't wish to come into the house."

"Look here, there's a quiet little room up the yard, in one of the old wings. I'll take her there, and assure her of privacy, and you can go and talk to her. Wait a minute, and I'll fetch you."

Five minutes later, Brixey was ushered into a queer little room at the top of a flight of stairs in an ancient part of the house which he had not seen before. There was no furniture in it but a rickety table and a couple of decayed chairs.

In the light of a small lamp which Brackett had set on the table he saw a tall, slightly-built woman, dressed in old-fashioned rusty black garments, whose head and face were so thoroughly obscured by thick swathings of veil that it was impossible to see any features beyond a prominent nose.

Brixey stared hard at this apparition. His visitor was so still, so statuesque, that for the moment he was taken aback, and it was not until a low, interrogative cough had sounded from behind the heavy veil that he regained his wits.

"You wish to speak to me, ma'am?" he asked awkwardly. "Won't you take a chair?"

The veiled lady glanced at the door.

"Mr. Brixey, I suppose?" she said. "The Mr. Brixey whose name is on the posters? Yes, but is it—shall we be absolutely private?"

"I can assure you of that, ma'am," answered Brixey. "There's nobody at all in this part of the house; that door's closed; nobody will come, and we can talk in whispers. As for me, if you've come to tell me anything relating to my uncle, I'm as silent as—as a man can be! So——"

The mysterious visitor sat down in a chair on one side of the rickety table, and Brixey, taking the other, leaned towards her.

"Don't be afraid of anything!" he said reassuringly. "This is real privacy."

Without further delay the visitor pushed up the heavy swathings of veil, and Brixey found himself looking at an elderly woman, of a strongly marked countenance, who, now that she was unveiled, leaned nearer to him and regarded him with an attention equal to his own.

"I can tell you something that I know," she said in a low, tense whisper which did no more than reach his ear. "It may have something to do with what you're after, and if it is, you'll see that I'm paid—I'm poor!"

"That's all right," answered Brixey hurriedly. "Make yourself easy on that point."

The woman nodded and drew her chair still nearer to the intervening table.

"You mentioned one name on the placard they carried about this morning," she said, in the same low but clear tones. "It's about that I've come—about him—Mesham!"

CHAPTER XVI

WHO WAS HE?

ONCE more the name of the man in whom, as Brixey had long been convinced, much of the mystery which he was attempting to fathom centred! He was prepared for it, but he unconsciously started, and drew his own chair closer to the rickety table. His own eager face was very near to the woman's somewhat haggard and watchful one.

"Mesham!" he said. "Yes. And—what?"

"I'd better tell you who I am," answered the woman. "I'm well enough known in the town, but I came here like this because—well, in a place of this sort, it doesn't do to let it be known that you're interfering with your neighbour's business. And I'm neighbour to Mrs. Byfield. You'll know, I suppose, where she lives—in the Minorities?"

"I know," assented Brixey. "Been there."

"Perhaps you didn't notice at the side of her house, back of the garden, there's a little street—Friargate—that runs into the town?" said the visitor. "Well, there is, and her garden wall makes one side of it for some distance. There's a door in that wall—I live in a house right opposite that door."

"My name's Mrs. Iddison—I'm a dressmaker. And I do a good deal for Mrs. Byfield, plain things for her, and gowns for her servants, and I shouldn't like it to get to her ears that I've told anything that has to do with her affairs, you understand?"

"I see!" said Brixey. "Be reassured, Mrs. Iddison. All that you tell me's between ourselves."

"I don't know that it has anything to do with her," continued Mrs. Iddison. "But it certainly has to do with Mr. Mesham, and perhaps with this gentleman you're looking for."

"Well—it's this, sir. My windows look out on Mrs. Byfield's garden door, as I've said. Close by that garden door there's a lamp. It's the only lamp there is in Friargate, which is a short street. Now, last Tuesday night I was going to bed, about twenty minutes to ten, and I was just about drawing the blind down in my front upstairs window when I heard voices in the street below."

"I looked out and saw two gentlemen coming along. The lamp I mentioned was just in front of them, so, of course, the light fell full on them. One of them was Mr. Mesham. The other was a stranger—a tallish——"

"Be very careful about describing him, if you please," interrupted Brixey.

"As tall as Mr. Mesham," said Mrs. Iddison. "An elderly man, fresh-coloured, clean-shaved. He'd a grey suit and a Trilby hat. I couldn't say more about him. They were talking—well, loud enough for me to hear, though I didn't catch any words."

"It was just as if they were—you know—just strolling along, chatting. Mr. Mesham was smoking a cigar. And when they came to Mrs. Byfield's garden door, they turned in. So, of course, I didn't see them again that night."

"I judge from your last words that you saw them on some other occasion," observed Brixey.

"Yes, the next night," assented Mrs. Iddison. "But under different circumstances. It was about the same time. I was upstairs, in the same room. There was a taxicab came down Friargate—one of Stillwick's. It stopped at Mrs. Byfield's garden door."

"In a minute or two the door opened, and Mr. Mesham and another gentleman came out. As far as I could see, it was the stranger that I'd seen the night before—his build, anyway, but he'd an overcoat on, and a big white muffler, and a soft cap. I only got the merest glimpse

of his face. But I feel sure it was the same, from his height and general appearance."

"They entered the taxicab?" asked Brixey. "Both?"

"Both," replied Mrs. Iddison. "And, of course, off it went, round the corner and through the Minories. And that's all I know. Do you think, sir," she continued, with an anxious, interrogative look at Brixey, "do you think, from what I say, that this would be the gentleman who's missing?"

"I should say it's extremely likely," answered Brixey.

"Do you think I shall have any chance of getting anything out of that reward, sir?" she asked nervously. "I could do with it, I assure you."

"You know what the terms of my offer are," answered Brixey. "I'm offering the reward for information which will lead to the finding of Mr. Linthwaite, alive or dead. If what you've told me is of help—as I have no doubt it will be—you'll benefit. I shall have to follow it up, and find out more. You haven't told all this to anyone else?"

"Oh, dear no, sir!" replied Mrs. Iddison. "Not a soul! I'm not one for talking to neighbours, and, to tell you the truth, I've never thought anything of this until I saw that placard that was carried about this morning. No—I've told no one."

"Don't!" said Brixey. "And, talking of neighbours, do you think any of yours would be likely to see what you saw?"

"I have none close at hand," she answered. "Mine's the only dwelling house in Friargate. On one side of the street, coming from the main street, there's first St. Fridolin's church, and then the long wall of Mrs. Byfield's garden."

"On the other side there's a brewery—its walls and outbuildings run right up to my house, which is at the far corner. Then Friargate runs into the Minories. So there was nobody but me could have seen."

"Very well, Mrs. Iddison," said Brixey. "For the present, then, this is secret. I'll see that you are properly rewarded."

He waited until his visitor had resumed her heavy veil and had slipped quietly away up the courtyard of the "Mitre"; then he went back to his private sitting-room and sat down to think.

Was that his uncle whom Mrs. Iddison had seen with Mesham? It seemed extremely likely. But, if so, why this extraordinary secrecy of movement? And, beyond that, why the throwing away of hat and umbrella in Foxglove Lane? Was it possible, after all, that Mr. Linthwaite himself was mixed up, of his own free will, in the mysterious doings of these people, and that he, Brixey, was alarming himself unduly, and being foolishly officious?

Mrs. Iddison's information had certainly done something to shake him, and he was becoming almost angrily puzzled when word was brought to him that the young man from Stillwick's was outside.

Brixey grew more puzzled before he had been closeted with this visitor for many minutes. Stillwick's employee, like Mrs. Iddison, was out for what he could get. But, unlike her story, his appeared to have no mystery in it. It was a very plain, ordinary story of a cab transaction.

As a rule, said this young man, he was with his taxicab on a rank near the station. He was there early in the evening of the previous

Wednesday when Mr. Mesham came up to him and gave him an order. He was to be at Mrs. Byfield's—the garden-door entrance—at twenty minutes to ten that evening, and would be wanted for an hour or a little more.

There was no secrecy about it. Mr. Mesham was alone when he gave the order. And he, the driver, had fulfilled it at the time specified; he had driven up to the minute, and Mr. Mesham and another gentleman had at once come out and entered the cab.

"Well, where did you drive them?" asked Brixey.

"Ledfield Junction, sir," answered the man promptly.

"Where's that?" demanded Brixey.

"About five miles out, sir—going east," said the driver.

"Did they catch a train there, then?" asked Brixey.

"The strange gentleman did, sir—not Mr. Mesham," replied the man.

"Mr. Mesham he came back with me, after seeing his friend off."

"Do you know where the friend went?" inquired Brixey.

"Yes," said the driver. "I followed them into the booking hall to set my watch right, and I was standing near when the strange gentleman took his ticket. He booked to Brighton."

Brixey revolved this answer in his mind for a minute or two.

"Why should he have gone to Ledfield Junction when he could have gone from Selchester?" he asked.

"No train from here after eight o'clock, sir," answered the driver.

"The ten-seventeen at Ledbury starts from Bayington, on the coast—branch line, sir, that doesn't touch Selchester. That, I reckon, was why they went to Ledfield."

"Did you happen to hear Mr. Mesham address the other man by name?" asked Brixey.

But the driver shook his head. No, he hadn't heard any name mentioned. Mr. Mesham and the stranger seemed very friendly—very friendly indeed. Mr. Mesham went with him on to the platform, saw him off, then came back to the taxicab and was driven to his own rooms in Selchester. He paid for the cab then.

"I suppose you'd know the stranger if you saw him?" suggested Brixey.

But the driver was doubtful. He had only a vague, general idea of an elderly gentleman—as tall as Mr. Mesham, and a good deal wrapped up.

After he had gone, Brixey felt that all he had heard that evening only seemed to lead to the conclusion that Mr. Linthwaite might, after all, have gone to Paris on the previous Thursday, having spent Wednesday night in Brighton, and that the message from Newhaven might have originated from him, and the variation in it been dictated by him.

He was climbing the stairs to his room that night when he encountered Georgina Byfield in one of the big, gloomy corridors. A sudden notion seized upon him. He badly wanted somebody to talk to, to confide in.

"Look here!" he said, stopping her, "I'm an impulsive chap! If I haven't some soul to talk to to-morrow, I shall explode! It's Sunday. Come out with me. I want to tell you a whole budget of stuff. Coming?"

Georgina gave him an intelligent glance and moved off.

"See me after breakfast in the morning," she answered.

CHAPTER XVII

SUNDAY MORNING

WHAT time the bells of the old cathedral and of the ancient churches were ringing out in Selchester next morning, Mr. Richard Brixey and Miss Georgina Byfield, seated in a retired yet sunny nook of the city walls, were ruminating, he in his, and she in her way, on the story which he had just unfolded in all its fullness.

He had set before her everything that he had done, and all that he had learnt, since she fetched him away from Fleet Street three days before, and had given her all details with one exception—that of the little matter of the squinting man who had presented himself at Newhaven, which small particular he was as yet keeping to himself, for reasons of his own.

And now he was wanting to know what she, as a sensible young woman, with some business experience, thought of the various incidents and developments, and while she was thinking, he, too, was weighing and adding, viewing things from every conceivable aspect.

"Well?" he asked, after a long pause, during which Georgina, evidently very meditative, was tracing patterns with her umbrella in the loose gravel at their feet. "How does it all seem to you?"

Georgina took another minute or two for further reflection.

"You said you felt sure that money was at the bottom of it," she remarked at last. "What money? Whose money?"

"It might be Martin Byfield's money," replied Brixey. "There's a tidy lot of it, from what I hear."

"But that's settled," said Georgina. "It's Mrs. Byfield's and Fanshawe's. They've got it."

"She's got hers, to be sure," agreed Brixey. "But has he got his? Old Semmerby, the solicitor, mentioned that Fanshawe comes of age during this week."

"Fanshawe will be twenty-one on Tuesday," observed Georgina.

"Then he'll come into his fortune, I suppose," said Brixey. "A lot of money. He'll get two-thirds of what your uncle left. Now, supposing all this business has something to do with that?"

"What would Mr. Linthwaite have to do with it?" asked Georgina. "He'd nothing to do with the Byfield affairs, had he?"

"Not to my knowledge," answered Brixey. "But he might have had. Perhaps Gaffkin may have discovered something. But I say, look here, don't you think it was a very queer thing that Martin Byfield died without leaving a will?"

"Mr. Brackett," remarked Georgina, "used to say, at one time, that he didn't believe he died without leaving a will."

"Then where is it?" demanded Brixey. "No, we're running against a dead wall there, I think. If there'd been a will, it would have come to light by now."

"But here's a question I've wanted to ask you. Did you never see,

or meet, your Uncle Martin in his last days, never go to his house or anything of that sort?"

Georgina shook her head with a decided gesture.

"Mrs. Byfield wouldn't have either my father or myself at the house," she answered. "My uncle was infirm during the last two or three years, and she kept everybody away from him. If I ever saw him, it was in a bath-chair in the streets, and there was always Mrs. Byfield and a nurse with him. Wetherby, his old valet, used to wheel him out."

"So you never had any conversation with him in the last stages?" asked Brixey.

"I never remember speaking to him since I was sixteen or seventeen," replied Georgina.

Brixey considered matters a little.

"Seems a rather blunt way of putting things," he said presently, "but you'd have been in a bad way if it hadn't been for old Brackett, wouldn't you?"

"Very!" answered Georgina laconically. "Mr. Brackett has been a second father to me. Of course, keeping his books and writing his letters is a mere pretext for his kindness. He adopted me. I shouldn't have had anywhere or anybody to turn to but for him."

"He's a good old chap," said Brixey. "And yet, if we're going to be plainly straightforward, there you were with a remarkably rich uncle next door to you! Seems odd, eh?"

"I've told you that I don't believe my Uncle Martin knew anything about it," replied Georgina. "He was fenced in."

"By his wife," said Brixey. "What you say implies that she wasn't going to let him spare a penny for his niece. Now, he might comfortably have spared a good many pounds. Which makes it all the odder!"

Georgina gave her companion a quick, searching glance out of her eye- corners.

"You don't look into things any further than that?" she suggested.

Brixey returned the look.

"Not good at riddles," he retorted. "What's this one?"

"Old men are apt to be a bit talkative, aren't they?" said Georgina.

"I've always believed that Mrs. Byfield kept everybody away from my Uncle Martin because she was afraid of his saying things she didn't want anybody to hear."

"You think there were secrets?" suggested Brixey.

"I think she has secrets," assented Georgina.

"Now, why do you think so?" asked Brixey.

"Because I do!" she answered. "Besides, she looks as if she had!"

"Good feminine reasons," assented Brixey. "Well, it comes to this. The foundation of all this business is away back—a long way back. Questions arise. Who was Mrs. Byfield? When did my uncle, John Linthwaite, know her. What did he know? What's it all got to do with his sudden removal from the scene? And where is he?"

"You don't think, after all, that there may be a perfectly reasonable explanation of this?" asked Georgina. "That Mr. Linthwaite may be somehow mixed up with some business affair of these people, and have gone away in connection with it, and that he'll turn up all right in a day or two?"

"When I woke this morning," replied Brixey, "I was a good deal inclined to think that. But by breakfast time I was quite sure that my inclinations were leading me into a wrong path. For one very little, very simple reason.

"I can't conceive it possible that my uncle should leave Selchester in such a violent hurry that he couldn't either slip into the 'Mitre' or send a message to Mr. Brackett to say that he was going away. The thing's ludicrous! Moreover, what about the hat and umbrella found in Foxglove Lane?"

"Then you think—what?" asked Georgina.

"I think he's been kidnapped," said Brixey. "Put away somewhere until these folk, whoever they are, have brought off some business on which they're engaged, and with which his sudden coming to Selchester, and his knowledge of them, interfered.

"I say these folk. But I don't know what particular folk I mean! Mesham's one, no doubt. Probably Mrs. Byfield's another. There may—must, I think—be still more. And what are they after? If I knew that, I'd know a lot.

"As to my uncle's whereabouts, I'm now inclined to think that he may have been the elderly gentleman who drove with Mesham to Ledfield Junction and is known to have booked for Brighton. Perhaps he was met at Brighton by Mesham's confederates and safely locked up. The whole thing's getting into more of a tangle than I ever foresaw. And I tell you, my dear young lady, it all spells—money!"

Georgina made no answer to this emphatic declaration, and Brixey, after a pause, suddenly laughed.

"What a lark it would be if a sudden burst-up of some sort revealed the fact that money was coming to you!" he exclaimed.

"To me?" said Georgina, staring at him. "Nonsense!"

"Never mind," retorted Brixey. "I've heard and known of some queer cases about money and estates and that sort of thing. Supposing you were discovered to be a rich heiress? Perhaps there's money that ought to have come to your father, and perhaps your Uncle Martin knew of it, and perhaps Mrs. Byfield has inherited the secret, and perhaps——"

"I thought you prided yourself on being practical," interrupted Georgina.

"Eminently practical," replied Brixey, with assurance. "That's why I'm suggesting all this. You never know!" He pulled out his watch.

"Past noon," he said. "Let's be going 'Mitre'-wards. I'm wondering if Gaffkin will turn up. He might."

Ten minutes later Brixey walked into his sitting-room at the "Mitre" to find Gaffkin, who, at sight of him, held up a carefully sealed packet, with one word:

"Papers!"

CHAPTER XVIII

RECEIPTS AND PEDIGREES

BRIXEY realised that Gaffkin had made some important discovery, and hastened to shut the door.

"Found something out?" he asked. "Something really pertinent?"

"I think so," answered Gaffkin, laying stress on the personal pronoun.

"I do indeed. I'd have got back last night if I could, Mr. Brixey. I made this discovery yesterday afternoon late, but there wasn't a train. So I caught the very first one this morning."

"What is it?" demanded Brixey, pointing to the sealed packet. "In there?"

"The papers are in here," said Gaffkin. He glanced at a clock on the mantelpiece.

"We can't go into it now," he added. "It'll be a long and serious business. And, to tell you the truth, I'm famishing. I've had nothing since eight o'clock."

Just then the waiter came in to lay the cloth for lunch, and Brixey had to restrain his impatience. He had to restrain it again, not being particularly hungry himself, while Gaffkin ate and drank. It seemed to him that the meal—a typically English country hotel Sunday dinner—was never coming to an end.

But he knew that Gaffkin had been hard at it since they parted, and he encouraged him to enjoy himself. Moreover, when the waiter had removed the cloth, he ordered in a bottle of Brackett's best port, knowing that his companion had an old-fashioned taste for that wine.

Gaffkin sipped his first glass with great satisfaction, remarked dryly that a man felt much better disposed towards important business when he had dined well, and, drawing the packet towards him, broke the seals and cut the strings.

"I don't know what Mr. Linthwaite would say, sir, if he knew that I'd been going through his private papers," he remarked, glancing slyly at Brixey, "but as I'd your authority and warranty I made a pretty exhaustive search. And I'll tell you what I went for, Mr. Brixey."

"I thought the whole matter carefully over as I journeyed up to town yesterday morning, and I came to the conclusion that I'd better stick to a definite object—this object. We know that Mesham is a man who used to come, twice a year, to Mr. Linthwaite's for money, calling himself Mr. X."

"Very well, it struck me that I'd better look for receipts for those payments, in the hope of getting at Mesham's real name. And I've found receipts. Not in Mesham's name, you may be sure, but if they don't refer to Mesham I shall be astonished. Personally, I've no doubt of it, because of the dates, and the regularity of those dates. But we'll go through things in order."

Gaffkin had by this time opened his packet. From it he drew a small, thin quarto manuscript book, bound in sheepskin, and furnished with a clasp. This he laid aside. He also took out two bundles of folded papers, each tied up with red tape; these he arranged before him.

"Now, look here, sir," he began, tapping the two bundles with his forefinger. "There are two series of receipts, going back for thirty years, precisely, from this present year. They refer to half-yearly payments which Mr. Linthwaite, first as Mr. John Herbert, afterwards as Mr. John Linthwaite, has been in the habit of making to two persons, evidently beneficiaries under a will of which Mr. Linthwaite is trustee and executor."

"From the wording of the receipts you will see that the will in question was that of one James Melsome; the names of the two beneficiaries are Cradock Melsome and Charles Melsome."

"Melsome—Melsome?" said Brixey. "The name's somewhat familiar—at least, I've heard it. Some distant relations of my uncle's, I fancy."

"Precisely the conclusion I've come to, as I'll show you presently," agreed Gaffkin, pointing to the sheepskin-bound book. "That they are relations, certain entries in this book seem to prove."

"Well, now, I want you to look at these receipts. Mr. Linthwaite is, as you know, a highly methodical person, and they're all duly arranged in order. Let's examine those of Cradock Melsome first. Now observe the date of the first—March 28, 1889. The wording of the receipt is practically that of all the rest:

"Received from John Herbert, Esquire, the sum of seventy-five pounds under the will of James Melsome deceased."

"CRADOCK MELSOME."

"Now," continued Gaffkin, "observe, as we go through them, that these receipts of Cradock Melsome's are dated from various places. They begin in London. Later, they are from Boulogne. Still later they are from New York."

"And for the last ten or eleven years, right up to the last, they have been from Quebec, where, it's very evident, this Cradock Melsome must have definitely settled. The last receipt, you see, Mr. Brixey, was sent from Quebec six months ago."

Brixey inspected the various documents as Gaffkin laid them before him, and, without comment, glanced at the second bundle.

"These refer to the other beneficiary, Charles Melsome," said Gaffkin. "Now, the wording is just the same. He, too, gets these payments, at half-yearly intervals, under the will of James Melsome, deceased. They begin at the same time as those made to Cradock Melsome. They, too, are from various places, but mostly they are dated in London."

"Two facts, however, are notable—I want you to pay particular regard to them. We'll take the second first. Note that the last four receipts—that means receipts for the last two years—are dated from Brighton."

"But note, too, a much more significant fact, in view of something to which I'm going to draw your attention in this book; that some years ago—fifteen years to be exact—there was a period of five years during which no payment was made at all to Charles Melsome. You see, Mr. Brixey—there's a hiatus of five years in the payments."

"I see," assented Brixey, as Gaffkin ranged the papers in order. "Nothing paid during five years."

"Nothing," said Gaffkin. "But look. The next receipt is for five years' arrears. Note the amount. It's £772 10s."

"What does that mean? It means five years' income at £150 a year, and £22 10s. interest at three per cent. In other words, the income had been lying at the bank for five years. Then Charles Melsome drew it all in a lump."

"Something, I suppose, hangs on that?" asked Brixey.

Gaffkin sorted the various receipts into their proper places and bundles, and, laying them aside, took up the sheepskin-bound book.

"I won't say that anything that we're concerned with hangs on that," he replied. "But it's a highly significant and important fact, and has a relative importance to matters in general.

"But now, this book, Mr. Brixey—it's a book in which your uncle seems to have written down a lot of family history and information—pedigrees and genealogies, and all that sort of stuff. You're mentioned in it, and your mother and father."

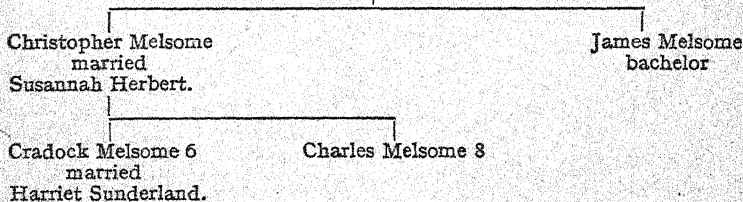
"My mother was, of course, Mr. Linthwaite's sister," remarked Brixey. "She was a Herbert. I told you he took the name of Linthwaite on coming into some property, some years since, before you knew him."

"Precisely, sir," agreed Gaffkin. "There's the whole Herbert pedigree in here, and the fact recorded that your mother married Mr. Samuel Brixey, of Camberwell—your father. The Herberts, I gather, were a Warwickshire family. But we're not concerned with either Herberts or Brixeyes. We're concerned with these Melsomes. Now, there are two pages in this book which deal with them.

"You'll observe that about sixty years ago a Miss Susannah Herbert married a Mr. Christopher Melsome, who is here set down, in correct pedigree fashion, as being the son of one Stephen Melsome, and the brother of James Melsome. There it is—set out in your uncle's handwriting."

Brixey looked attentively at the page to which Gaffkin pointed, and read the tabulated entries.

Continued from Herbert Pedigree, vii.
Stephen Melsome, of High Barnet.



"Now, observe," continued Gaffkin. "Christopher Melsome, who married Susannah Herbert, who, I make out from the Herbert pedigree, was Mr. Linthwaite's aunt, left two sons—Cradock and Charles. We don't know if he left them any fortune, but it's very evident, from these receipts, that their uncle, James, who, you see, was a bachelor, did. He left them £150 a year each—evidently in trust, and Mr. Linthwaite was undoubtedly trustee and executor.

"If I'd had time, I'd have searched for James Melsome's will. The probability is that these two, Cradock and Charles, have only a life interest in it. But that's neither here nor there, just now. What is of importance is this. Do you see two little figures—in one case a six, in the other an eight—against the names of Cradock and Charles?"

"I see 'em!" said Brixey, deeply interested.

Gaffkin turned over the pages of the pedigree book.

"Mr. Linthwaite," he said, "has a habit, evidently, of writing down little notes—what you might call autobiographical notes—about the people mentioned in his pedigrees. There's one about your father and one about yourself, Mr. Brixey. But now, look what he's written about these two Melsomes!"

Brixey looked, and read his uncle's naïvely frank remarks.

"6. A bad egg. His wife, a decent woman, ran away from him in less than six months, unable to stand him any longer. She made a clean disappearance, too; never could trace her."

"8. Worse, if anything, than the other—got five years for forgery. Odd that two such utterly worthless fellows should come of such good old stock!"

With a sharp exclamation, Brixey pushed the book away from him, and, jumping to his feet, stared at Gaffkin. And Gaffkin smiled and wagged his head with a knowing gesture.

"By Gad!" exclaimed Brixey. "You've hit it in one, Gaffkin! Of course—the Christopher Mesham of Selchester is the Charles Melsome of those receipts!"

"Yes!" said Gaffkin. "But where's his brother Cradock? And where's Cradock's wife—Harriet Sunderland?"

CHAPTER XIX

LEGALITIES

BRIXEY relapsed into his chair again and stared at Gaffkin harder than before. And Gaffkin, helping himself to another glass of Brackett's old port, shook his head over his first sip of it, not so much in token of the appreciation which he felt as of his realisation of the deep mystery in which he and Brixey were becoming more and more entangled.

"Well?" said Brixey at last. "You've ideas, Gaffkin—notions! Out with 'em! This is the time for speaking."

Gaffkin took a pinch of snuff from an old-fashioned box which he drew from his waistcoat pocket.

"Man and boy, boy and man," he remarked, "I've had a good long experience of legal matters, Mr. Brixey, and since I left Mr. Linthwaite I've seen and known some queer things in the private detective line. This is a queer thing!"

"Of course, since I made these discoveries yesterday, and since hearing the bits you've told me to-day, I've formulated a theory. This is a conspiracy, probably shared in by a lot of people. Object—to get hold of the late Martin Byfield's money. Money, sir! That's the idea. Money!"

"I've felt that it was money pretty nearly all along," agreed Brixey. "But I haven't quite seen the ins and outs of the conspiracy theory."

"I take it that it's something like this," said Gaffkin. "Do you remember what Wetherby, Martin Byfield's old servant, told me about

the marriage abroad—at Monaco? That his master married a Mrs. Sunderland?"

"That's established," assented Brixey. "Old Mr. Semmerby, the family solicitor, told me that. He told me who, or rather what, she was at that time—manageress of some English tea-rooms at Nice."

Gaffkin jerked his thumb in the direction of the sheepskin-bound book.

"In my opinion," he said quietly, "the Mrs. Sunderland of that time was identical with the Harriet Sunderland who married Cradock Melsome, as specified by your uncle in that pedigree! She wasn't Mrs. Sunderland at all—she was Mrs. Cradock Melsome."

Brixey whistled, a sign that light was beginning to break in on him.

"Whew!" he exclaimed. "But if Cradock Melsome was alive, six months ago, in Quebec, she—she wasn't free to marry Martin Byfield at all?"

"Precisely—unless she'd got a divorce from Cradock, of which we've no record or proof," answered Gaffkin. "Now, look at what we know."

"Mr. Linthwaite, in that sort of biographical note, says that Cradock Melsome was what he calls a bad egg. He says in effect that he was so bad that his wife, a very decent woman, had experienced so much of his badness in six months that she left him—disappeared altogether, and so effectively that she couldn't be traced. That may mean—probably does mean—that Mr. Linthwaite tried to trace her. But—we know that her name was Harriet Sunderland."

"Now, Mrs. Byfield's name when she married Martin Byfield was Mrs. Sunderland. Was Mrs. Sunderland really Mrs. Cradock Melsome? It looks like it."

"Go on, I'm following," said Brixey.

"Let's suppose that she was," continued Gaffkin. "Now, when she met Martin Byfield, some years had elapsed since she left Cradock Melsome. We know that she told Martin Byfield that she was a widow. She may have thought that she was free to marry."

"But, as Cradock Melsome was alive, as we know he was, from all these receipts, she wasn't free to marry. And therefore the marriage at Monaco with Martin Byfield was in our law no marriage at all."

"Or—bigamous?" suggested Brixey.

"She may have believed that she was free to marry," repeated Gaffkin. "She may, for anything we know, have had legal advice. As near as I can put times and dates together, she'd left, and had most likely not heard of Cradock Melsome for over seven years."

"She may have had a genuine belief that Cradock Melsome was dead. Probably she could certainly prove that she didn't know him to be living. But whether or not, as Cradock Melsome was living, and if there had been no divorce between them, her marriage to Martin Byfield was null and void."

"Absolutely?" asked Brixey.

"Absolutely! Now, then," continued Gaffkin—"what follows? She does marry Martin Byfield. They live here in Selchester or abroad. They have a son, this young fellow, Fanshawe. No one suspects Mrs. Byfield's secret—whether she ever told it to Martin Byfield himself is a

very doubtful point in my mind And who was there to discover it—for a long time?

"Cradock Melsome, we know, was in America and Canada, Charles Melsome was in England, and five years in prison, for forgery, and Selchester is, except for tourists, an out-of-the-way little place. All goes well for Mrs. Byfield and her secret. And at last Martin Byfield dies—and dies intestate. Anyway, no will comes to light.

"So the widow administers the estate. Most of it, I understand, is in the form of personal property. There is a widow and one child. The widow takes one-third; the child—Fanshawe—two-thirds. What real estate there is, is shared similarly. So things stand.

"But," concluded Gaffkin, wagging his forefinger warningly, "only on the supposition that the marriage at Monaco was a valid one!"

"And if it wasn't?" asked Brixey.

"Let's suppose that it was not!" said Gaffkin. "In that case Mrs. Byfield and her son are not entitled to one penny. She was not Martin Byfield's legal wife, therefore she was not his legal widow. Fanshawe Byfield was not in any legal position to his father.

"Granted that Mrs. Byfield was really Mrs. Cradock Melsome, and that Fanshawe Byfield was the offspring of the illegal union between her and Martin Byfield, neither mother nor son is entitled to anything. The whole of the late Martin Byfield's real and personal estate, on his dying intestate, passed to the young lady who keeps our worthy landlord's books—Miss Georgina."

"Great Scott! Is that a fact?" exclaimed Brixey.

"Dead sure fact, sir!" assented Gaffkin. "If Martin Byfield had known the whole truth and wanted to leave his estate to the supposed widow and her son, he'd have had to make a will and specify them by their legal names, making it clear whom he meant.

"As he died intestate, they don't and can't come in at all. Everything that he possessed goes to his niece, daughter of his brother Peter. Stern, absolute fact! But," he added, "with that, just now, we've nothing to do. That's in the future. We're concerned with the recent past."

"I'm following every syllable!" said Brixey.

"Very well," continued Gaffkin. "Leave that aside and consider Mrs. Byfield's position when Martin died. He died intestate. She administered the estate and came into her share. Her son is just about to come into his.

"No one knows that she isn't really and truly the legal widow of the deceased—it no doubt looks to her as if no one ever would know. And then, as near as we can judge, about two years ago Mrs. Byfield somewhere, somehow, comes face to face with a nasty reminder of the past—Mesham!"

"Otherwise Charles Melsome," observed Brixey.

"Otherwise Charles Melsome, her brother-in-law," assented Gaffkin. "Charles Melsome, *alias* Christopher Mesham, convicted forger, general bad lot. We don't know where she met him. Perhaps in London. Perhaps in Brighton. But she met him! And he recognised her, and he knew his brother Cradock to be alive—and henceforth Mesham, as we'll call him, had Mrs. Byfield at his mercy!"

"Blackmail!" exclaimed Brixey.

"No other!" agreed Gaffkin. "Blackmail, to be sure! Mesham, you may be certain, would very quickly find out all about his sister-in-law and that she was in extremely good circumstances. Do you think he was going to let his chance slip? He was probably living on his three pounds a week, and on such additional pickings as his wits could scrape up, and he would jump at the chance of getting a nice thing out of the secret.

"For remember—he had nothing to do but to go to Semmerby and tell him the truth, and Mrs. Byfield and Fanshawe would be penniless. So he no doubt came to an arrangement with the woman who was at his mercy, and hence he lives in great comfort over the saddler's shop and draws a handsome yearly income out of his victim."

Gaffkin paused and once more wagged his emphasising forefinger.

"But something occurs!" he went on. "By sheer accident, Mr. John Linthwaite turns up here in Selchester. He recognises Mrs. Byfield—your uncle, sir, has an extraordinary memory for faces—as the woman he had known long since as Mrs. Cradock Melsome; the woman who had disappeared so effectually that she couldn't be traced.

"Now, Mr. Linthwaite knows that Cradock is alive—was alive, at any rate, six months before, when he forwarded his last receipt from Quebec. He probably tells Mrs. Byfield this, and hears her story from her. And in the thick of it, Mesham comes upon them. With Mesham, Mr. Linthwaite walks away. They are overheard making an appointment for half-past two that afternoon.

"Why? Probably to discuss the strange situation of the Byfields, mother and son, more fully. But of any more we know nothing. That, Mr. Brixey, is as far as I've got."

"Have you no further theories in the light of what I've told you?" asked Brixey.

For the first time since the beginning of their talk, Gaffkin showed signs of doubt and uncertainty.

"I don't know what to think," he answered, after a pause. "It's no use denying that I've thought very seriously over the possibility that there's been murder done. Mesham is a bad lot—a deep, designing man! I don't think he'd stick at that. And it would seem as if that man who evidently went to Newhaven with the substituted message was in with him.

"We don't know who's in and who isn't in the whole thing. It may be that Fanshawe Byfield is in it. But as it sounds, Mr. Brixey, I don't think we ought to shut our eyes to the fact that it may be murder."

"No," protested Brixey. "I don't believe that! I think they've put my uncle out of the way somewhere for a few days. Until their coup comes off, don't you see? Then, when he can't interfere, he'll be released."

"If that theory's correct," observed Gaffkin, "the elderly man whom Mrs. Iddison saw, and who was taken to Ledfield last Wednesday night, was not Mr. Linthwaite. That's certain."

"For that matter," said Brixey, "he may have been some man who's nothing whatever to do with the case. The mere fact that Mesham drove openly with him to Ledfield and made no concealment about it

impels me to think that he was merely some acquaintance of his and the Byfields. I think we can dismiss that episode altogether."

But Gaffkin shook his head at that suggestion.

"No," he said. "We'll not dismiss even the slightest detail of anything that we've learned. It'll all fit in, somewhere, somehow. But our task is to find Mr. Linthwaite.

"Now we're certain that a conspiracy to get hold of the Byfield money is behind his disappearance. How would it be if we make a bold stroke as regards the money?"

CHAPTER XX

THE FEMININE INSTINCT

BRIXEY'S look of inquiry showed Gaffkin that he did not wholly comprehend this suggestion, and he leaned across the table, tapping the papers which still lay there.

"You don't quite see what I mean," he said. "I mean this. Bring the money question right to the front, at once—to-morrow. Raise the question, publicly, as to the rights of Mrs. Byfield and her son in the Byfield estate. If that wouldn't pretty quickly solve the mystery about Mr. Linthwaite, then I don't know, at present, what would."

"How can we raise it?" asked Brixey. "We aren't concerned."

Gaffkin jerked his thumb towards a wall of the sitting-room behind which, as they both knew, lay Brackett's private parlour.

"There's somebody in there, or generally in there, who can," he said significantly. "Miss Georgina Byfield. She could raise a hornets' nest round the whole matter very quickly if she liked."

"How?" demanded Brixey.

"Well," replied Gaffkin, "roughly speaking, in this way. If my theory is correct as to Mrs. Byfield's marriages, the girl in the next room is certainly the rightful owner of the estate of the late Martin Byfield. Therefore, through legal channels, she can apply to the court for an order which would prevent Mrs. Byfield, as administratrix, from doing anything with the assets of the estate until the whole affair has been gone into and decided.

"She'd have to prove, of course, that Mrs. Byfield is really the wife of Cradock Melsome, that her marriage to him has never been dissolved, that he's still alive, and that, accordingly, Mrs. Byfield is not and never was Mrs. Byfield, legally."

"We couldn't prove all that straight off," objected Brixey.

"No," assented Gaffkin, "but I think there's sufficient *prima facie* evidence in what we know from these papers and this book to warrant an application to the court. A smart solicitor would put the matter in shape and get such an application made at once, in time to stop the handing over of his share to Fanshawe Byfield on Tuesday, when he comes of age.

"Only, it would have to be done at once—immediately. If Miss Georgina Byfield would give her consent, I'd engage to run up to town to-night and find a man who'd take it in hand and make an application to the court first thing to-morrow morning."

"That means," said Brixey, slowly and thoughtfully, "that we should have to tell her all about it?"

"She's an intelligent young woman," answered Gaffkin. "Above the average, from what I've seen of her. It wouldn't take long to explain matters."

Brixey reflected for a while in silence.

"How would that help me to find my uncle?" he asked.

"It would force the other side to show its hand," replied Gaffkin. "My own notion is that if Mr. Linthwaite has been put away somewhere, as you feel sure he has, it's because they want to keep him out of the way until Fanshawe Byfield has come into legal possession of his fortune, which will happen, automatically, by his coming-of-age on Tuesday."

"Now, if my theory about Mrs. Byfield's marriages is a good one, she would have to reveal the truth, and the additional truth about Mr. Linthwaite would necessarily come out."

"Money, Mr. Brixey, is at the bottom of all this—that money, the Byfield money; and when the secret about the money is solved, all the rest will be solved."

"I don't know if she's the sort of girl who'd like all that publicity," remarked Brixey, after another thoughtful pause.

"It's the quickest and surest way that I can see," said Gaffkin.

"And supposing your theory's all wrong?" suggested Brixey.

"No harm done," answered Gaffkin. "You often hear of questions being raised as to this sort of thing, especially in the case of intestates' estates. Put into a nutshell, it's this."

"We say that, legally, the woman calling herself Mrs. Martin Byfield is not Mrs. Martin Byfield at all, but is Mrs. Cradock Melsome, and therefore not entitled to administer Martin Byfield's estate nor to benefit in it."

"She'd have to prove the contrary. And, in my opinion, in whatever proceedings, even in their initial stages, resulted, Mr. Linthwaite would have to emerge. But any proceedings would have to originate from this young lady. If I'm right, she's next of kin."

Brixey, after thinking in silence for several minutes, got up and made for the door.

"I'll get her to come here, and we'll tell her," he said.

He went round by the deserted bar parlour to the private sitting-room which opened out of it. The door was slightly open; he looked in. Brackett, comfortably seated in his favourite easy chair, with a large silk handkerchief spread over head and face, was indulging in a Sunday afternoon nap.

In the old-fashioned window-seat, which looked out on the garden behind, Georgina Byfield was disposed in equal comfort, reading a novel. She glanced towards the door as Brixey put his head inside, and, laying aside her book, tiptoed out to him, with a warning glance in the old landlord's direction. Brixey motioned her into the bar parlour behind him.

"Can you give me ten minutes?" Brixey asked. "I want you to hear something that Gaffkin has to say. Something that's to be kept to ourselves, if you please, for the present, not to be mentioned to Mr. Brackett, for instance—just yet, anyway."

Georgina nodded in silence and followed him into his room, where he

seated her at one end of the table, with Gaffkin and himself on either side of her.

"Mr. Gaffkin," said Brixey, indicating the papers and the book, "has made a discovery at Mr. Linthwaite's rooms in London which may affect you.

"Don't be alarmed!" he continued, as Georgina started in surprise. "There's nothing really alarming in it. But, if Mr. Gaffkin's right, this discovery does concern you, and it may help me to find my uncle. Now, in confidence, just let Gaffkin tell the whole story and explain the whole thing. Then we want to hear what you have to say."

Georgina sat quietly by, a model of attentive patience, while Gaffkin, for the second time that afternoon, unfolded his story and explained all its multifarious details. And Brixey, who knew it all, watched her carefully as she watched Gaffkin.

She showed no particular emotion or interest at any part of the story; her whole attitude and the expression of her eyes and lips denoted nothing but keen and almost cold attention. She might, indeed, thought Brixey, have been a judge, impartial and observant, listening to the opening address of counsel.

The theoretical revelations which had startled him did not seem to startle her; the suggestions which, if proved, would secure a complete reversal of her fortunes, seemed to arouse no excitement in her. But as the unfolding went on, her face grew graver and graver, and Brixey saw that she was putting facts together and weighing evidence, and bringing her instincts of feminine intuition and logic to bear.

But to what end he could not tell; her face, taking it altogether, was as sphinx-like at the end as at the beginning.

"So that's all!" concluded Gaffkin at last. "I've explained everything that I've already told Mr. Brixey. You understand it, Miss Byfield?"

"Very well, then, as I've said to Mr. Brixey, if you like to move in the matter, on the evidence that these papers and so on seem to afford, then, in my opinion, there'll be some revelations. How do you feel about it?" he asked, glancing at Georgina with a professional curiosity. "There's a great deal to play for, you know!"

Georgina had for some minutes been slowly twisting an old-fashioned signet ring—a man's ring—round and round her finger, keeping her eyes steadily on it. Another minute or two passed before she looked up from this.

Then she looked straight at Gaffkin and from him to Brixey.

"No!" she said. "That's final. No!"

The two men looked at each other; then Brixey turned to Georgina.

"That means—what?" he asked.

"It means that I won't do anything against Mrs. Byfield and Fanshawe," she answered. "Supposing all that Mr. Gaffkin thinks is true—and perhaps I've reasons, and good reasons, for thinking it may be—I'm not going to do a thing in the way you suggest.

"I've no reason to like Mrs. Byfield, and as for Fanshawe, I've scarcely ever spoken to him since we were children. But Mrs. Byfield was a very good wife to my Uncle Martin—I do know that—and Fanshawe is his son, and—and—if there are any flaws in the affair, well—"

She paused for a moment and then, as both men watched her, went on swiftly.

"I should think it a great shame if she were done out of her rights, and if Fanshawe were done out of his," she said, showing some spirit at last. "It would be abominable! I'll have nothing to do with it—nothing!"

Brixey smacked the table.

"By Gad, you're right!" he exclaimed. "Good! You're right, all through. It would be just that—abominable! Gaffkin—that's clean off!"

Gaffkin smiled and shook his head.

"Sentiment, you know, Miss Byfield!" he said. "Sentiment, Mr. Brixey. But, of course, if Miss Byfield feels like that——"

"I do," said Georgina, and made for the door. Brixey followed her out. In the hall she paused and looked at him. "Don't go on with that!" she said. "I'd rather scrub floors all my life than try to turn those two out!"

"I shan't do anything," Brixey hastened to say. "No, indeed! I—the fact is, I feel as you do about it. I agree with you. It would be a shame. But, I say, there's my uncle to consider, you know."

"Mayn't it be that your uncle's disappearance has nothing to do with Mrs. Byfield?" suggested Georgina. "If all that Mr. Gaffkin says is true, Mr. Mesham is a pretty bad lot. Doesn't it seem as if he might be the real culprit in all this—he and perhaps others?"

"It's a queer mix-up altogether," said Brixey perplexedly. And when Georgina left him he went back to Gaffkin and shook his head. "That won't do," he said. "You see—she'll have nothing to do with that line!"

"It may be taken up, all the same, though," observed Gaffkin. "My own opinion is that whoever takes it up it'll come out. I'd stake my professional reputation on this—there's something in it."

That evening, Gaffkin having gone out for a solitary stroll, Brixey remembered that he had promised to call again on Mr. Semmerby, and so went round to the old solicitor's house. And there, in Semmerby's parlour, evidently interrupted in a confidential talk with him, he found young Fanshawe Byfield.

CHAPTER XXI

UNEXPECTED

If it had not been that the old lawyer had called out to him as he waited in the hall, bidding him heartily to come straight in, Brixey would have retired on seeing Fanshawe, who on his entrance glanced at him awkwardly, and, as he thought, a little shamefacedly.

But Semmerby waved him to a chair, and indicating his other caller, said, with a sly glance at Brixey, that he believed he'd met Mr. Fanshawe Byfield before.

"We've met," assented Brixey laconically.

Fanshawe's boyish face flushed, and his manner grew more awkward.

"Look here!" he said, suddenly turning to the new-comer. "I—I

dare say you thought I was beastly rude—insolent, perhaps—when you came to our place the other night. But if you'll believe me, I was decidedly upset about my mother. She's been ill all this week, and——"

"Don't say another word!" interrupted Brixey. "No ill-feeling on my part, I assure you. If I'd known, I wouldn't have troubled you at all. I'm sorry I did. I'm sorry, too, to hear about Mrs. Byfield. I hope——"

"There's something Fanshawe can tell you," broke in the old lawyer. "We were talking of it when you came. Say it, Fanshawe!"

"It's only this," said Fanshawe. "I can assure Mr. Brixey of this—I know he's suspected, naturally I suppose, that my mother's something to do with his uncle's disappearance. Well, as I say, I can assure him of this—positively assure him—my mother has never seen nor heard of Mr. Linthwaite, or Herbert, as she calls him, since he walked out of the Priory grounds talking to Kit Mesham last Tuesday. She knows nothing."

"I'll accept that frankly," answered Brixey. "I'd begun to believe it myself. But you've mentioned that man Mesham. I shouldn't believe him if he said the same."

Fanshawe and the old lawyer exchanged glances, and Semmerby nodded.

"I think you might tell Mr. Brixey what you've just told me," he said.

"Well," responded Fanshawe, turning to Brixey, "I'd a row with Kit Mesham this afternoon—happened to meet him. I told him straight out that in my opinion it was all due to some of his confounded tricks that there was all this bother, and that suspicion had been thrown, somehow, on my mother."

"And I wanted to know why the deuce he couldn't say what he did know, and—well, I said I'd a jolly good mind to take sides in finding out what he was up to, for I'll swear he's up to something."

"But you know what he is—at least Mr. Semmerby does—full of brag and bounce. And he said at last that if I wanted to know where Mr. John Linthwaite was, he was in Paris, on business that was his own concern, and that Selchester folk had nothing to do with."

"He said that definitely, did he?" asked Brixey.

"Definitely," replied Fanshawe. "And, of course, I asked him how he knew. To which he said that was his business, and nobody else's."

The old lawyer got out of his chair and laid hold of his hat and gloves, which lay on a side table.

"Well," he said, "I must be off to church, I'm a churchwarden, and I've certain duties. I think," he added, as he went out with his callers, "I think you two young men might talk a bit. I'm sure Mr. Fanshawe Byfield would tell you anything he could that would help you in your search."

Brixey nodded, and he and Fanshawe walked slowly down the street together in the direction of the "Mitre."

"Mr. Semmerby's right," said Fanshawe, "I would tell you anything. But I don't know a thing. I never saw your uncle here, and I know my mother has neither heard of nor seen him since Tuesday morning. So what can I tell? But I believe that chap Kit Mesham knows a lot!"

"You'd do me a service if you'd answer a question or two," said Brixey. "They're of real moment, or I wouldn't ask 'em."

"Answer any question you like!" responded Fanshawe with alacrity. "Anything! What is it?"

"Can you remember what you were doing with yourself last Tuesday and Wednesday evenings?" asked Brixey. "Where you spent them, and so on?"

"Can I!" exclaimed Fanshawe, with a laugh. "Can't I just! I dined with Sam Merridew, the solicitor, on Tuesday night. He'd a sort of bachelor party; three of us beside himself. We were playing bridge from nine o'clock till two in the morning—I dropped a good bit. That's where I was on Tuesday night."

"All the time—didn't go home for anything?" asked Brixey.

"Go home? No!" answered Fanshawe. "Merridew lives outside the town—up Waterdale way. I was at his house every minute from seven o'clock till we broke up at two next morning."

"Where were you Wednesday night?" inquired Brixey.

"Wednesday night I dined at home with my mother," replied Fanshawe. "Seven o'clock's our time. Quarter to eight I went out—to the club. And I was at the club from then onwards till about ten minutes to twelve."

"Thank you," said Brixey, who now knew that the mysterious stranger mentioned by Mrs. Iddison had been taken to the Byfield house in Fanshawe's absence. "I can't tell you why just now, but you've given me some valuable information. Now I'll ask you another question. Has your mother been much upset during the last few days?"

Fanshawe groaned dismally.

"Upset?" he said. "I believe you! She's been awfully upset, and it's upsetting me. She's never been exactly well since my father died—nervous and so on—and she's a weak heart, and—well, she has been thoroughly wrong since last Tuesday. I think that sudden meeting with your uncle upset her, though she's never said so."

"You see, I'll tell you where it is!" he went on in a sudden boyish burst of confidence. "She has nobody much to talk to, my mother—no women, anyway. She hasn't been one to make friends, and she has no particular woman friend in the place. I wish she had."

Brixey suddenly laid a hand on his companion's arm. At their first meeting he had set down Fanshawe Byfield as an arrogant, bullying, unlicked young cub.

Now, though he still thought him raw and inclined to bluster and perhaps to brag, he was discovering something human in him.

"Look here!" he said. "Don't think me officious or interfering. I'm a stranger to you, and to this town; but naturally I've learnt a bit since I've been here. If your mother wants a woman's sympathy and company, hasn't it struck you that you've got a cousin in there?" He pointed to the "Mitre," close to which they had by that time approached.

"Now, I say, don't think me interfering, but why don't you walk in and ask your cousin Georgina to go and see your mother? Hang it all, my lad, blood's thicker than water!"

Fanshawe started. His mouth opened, and his fair-complexioned

cheeks flushed deeply. After a minute's hard stare at his companion he nodded his head two or three times in emphatic fashion.

"By Gad, and so I will!" he said. "Good tip! I'm obliged to you. You see, there's been a coldness—I don't know why, I never understood it—but, well, as you say, blood is thicker than water. Where can I find my cousin?"

"Come in!" commanded Brixey. He led Fanshawe into the hotel and down the hall to his own private sitting-room and installed him there while he went to find Georgina. She, evidently bent on church attendance, was coming down the stairs, prayer-book in hand.

"I've another sort of pious mission for you," said Brixey, drawing her aside. "Don't be startled. Fanshawe Byfield's here. He wants you to go with him to see his mother. Go!"

Georgina flushed as surprisedly as Fanshawe had, but she instantly turned in the direction to which Brixey pointed, flinging an inquiring glance at him.

"Your doing?" she asked.

"Well, perhaps a bit of suggestion on my part," admitted Brixey. "Well meant, I assure you. This lad's in trouble. And from what he says, so is his mother. Do 'em a good turn."

Georgina walked into the little parlour, where Fanshawe was leaning against the table. She held out a hand.

"Well, Fanshawe," she said, with a ready acceptance of the situation, for which Brixey unfeignedly admired her. "How are you?"

Fanshawe vigorously shook the offered hand.

"Hallo, Georgie!" he exclaimed with unusual enthusiasm. "Glad to see you! I say, come and see my mother, will you? There's a good girl! She's not at all well. Come and talk to her!"

"To be sure—just now," responded Georgina. Then she turned to Brixey, who was lingering at the door. "Bring Mr. Brixey with you, Fanshawe," she added. "He'll talk to you while I talk to your mother."

Ten minutes later Brixey found himself following the two cousins into a room at the Minories wherein lamps had not yet been lighted. Bright and warm as the day had been, there was a fire on the hearth, and by it in a low chair sat Mrs. Byfield, evidently deep in thought.

She started as the three entered the room, and Brixey saw that since he had last seen her her face had changed. She looked like a woman in great trouble. Fanshawe went straight to her and laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Mother," he said, "you've seen Mr. Brixey before. He and I met just now at Semmerby's. I've told him you know nothing about his uncle, and he believes it. And, look here—here's Georgina come to see you. It'll do you good to talk to her."

Mrs. Byfield looked slowly and searchingly at Brixey and Georgina. Suddenly she pointed the girl to a chair at her side, and then turned to her son.

"Fanshawe," she said, in a curiously quiet, monotonous voice, "take Mr. Brixey to the dining-room and entertain him. I would like to speak to Georgina alone!"

CHAPTER XXII

WHAT HAD MRS. BYFIELD TOLD ?

FANSHAWE took Brixey away to another part of the big house, and into a long, low-ceilinged room, the French windows of which opened out on a walled garden. He lighted a lamp, produced a box of cigars, and set a decanter, a siphon, and glasses on the table.

"Have a drink," he said hospitably.

"Well, a mere spot, then," assented Brixey. "Interesting old house this of yours," he went on, when he had helped himself to a cigar and mixed a very weak whisky and soda.

"And that looks like a delightful old garden you've got outside. I like those walled gardens that one finds in towns like these—something appealing about them."

"Like to see it ?" asked Fanshawe, obviously relieved that his guest suggested something to do. "One or two fine old trees in it. Come and look round while it's still light."

Brixey followed Fanshawe out. He had been intending to suggest an exploration of the garden as soon as he saw that the room opened on it. He wanted to see for himself how it lay in relation to the dressmaker's house at the back.

Once outside in the twilight he looked curiously about him. The garden was a square, set in high old brick walls, and plentifully filled with hardy shrubs and trees. From a miniature lawn in the middle rose a cedar of considerable size. Fanshawe pointed to it with obvious pride.

"Only cedar tree in all Selchester," he said. "Don't know how old it is, but it's done well in its time, what ? There are a lot of rare shrubs about here. My father used to bring cuttings from the south of France and try to grow them. Some grew and flourished, and some didn't."

Brixey strolled round the paths, looking about him, until they came to a doorway set in the wall.

"Old part of the town, this, evidently," he observed casually. "What lies behind this garden ?"

Fanshawe opened the door and revealed a narrow lane.

"This is Friargate," he said. "Runs from the main street—yonder at the end—to the foot of the Priory grounds, across the Minories there. All old houses and places, there."

"That's St. Fridolin's Church along there. That place opposite is a brewery. Ramshackle property, most of it—ought to be pulled down."

"That would spoil the effect," remarked Brixey. He took a rapid glance round, and identified the house which the dressmaker had described to him as her own. "These old red-brick places would rejoice an artist—you get such colour effects out of them."

"Dare say !" said Fanshawe indifferently. "But, by George, they're full of rats ! I had two of my fox-terriers in there at the brewery one day last week. We killed over fifty rats in two hours—swarms with 'em. You don't want to buy a really good dog, do you ?"

"Not that I know of," answered Brixey. "Got one to sell?"

"No, but Nat Lee, the caretaker at the Priory ruins, has," replied Fanshawe. "A real good 'un, too—an Airedale terrier. Top-hole as a house-dog, or anything of that sort. If you want a house-dog, I can recommend him."

"My house is a set of chambers in the Temple," said Brixey. "I wouldn't condemn a dog to it. Nowhere to run about."

"Well, this chap's a good 'un," repeated Fanshawe. "I strolled up to Lee's on purpose to look at him the other night, and I soon got a proof of his value!"

"Oh?" said Brixey. "How, then?"

"I've a key into the Priory grounds," answered Fanshawe. "All yearly subscribers have, so that you can get in when you like. I let myself in the other night, latish, and walked up to Lee's house, and this Airedale was on the steps."

"Hanged if he'd let me pass him! I had to stand there and yell for Nat Lee. A real good 'un, my boy, and I'd buy him if we hadn't half a dozen already, one sort or another. Come and see 'em?"

He led Brixey (whose chief interest in his host's story had lain in the explanation which it afforded of Fanshawe's visit to the Priory on the previous night) to another part of the garden, where half a dozen dogs were confined in a wire enclosure.

Here Brixey spent the better part of an hour, listening to dog talk, in which his young host was an adept. And all the while he was wondering what was going on in that twilight-filled room where they had left Mrs. Byfield and Georgina alone.

For Brixey had watched the elder woman's face carefully during the moment in which he had seen her, and he felt instinctively that she had made up her mind to tell Georgina something. No doubt it was being told—and here he was, gazing ruminatively at Fanshawe's dogs.

There was a horse or two in a stable to be looked at when the dogs had been duly criticised, and altogether it was nearly nine o'clock when he and Fanshawe walked into the house again. Fanshawe, who had been loquacious enough in his kennels and stable, suddenly became quiet, and glanced uneasily at the door.

"They're having a long jaw, those two," he said at last. "I hope my mother isn't getting upset. I wish I knew what it is that's bothering her, for that there is something, I'm certain."

Just then Georgina came into the room, closed the door behind her, and, going tip to Fanshawe, laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Fanshawe," she said quietly, "I've had a long talk with your mother, and now I've something to tell you as the result of it. You'll be a good boy and do exactly what she wants, won't you?"

Fanshawe turned an astonished face on his cousin.

"Something out of the common?" he asked.

"Not exactly," replied Georgina. "She wants to go to London by the first train to-morrow morning. She wants you to go with her. And I've promised to go, too. We're all three going together. The train's eight-twenty, isn't it?"

"Now, will you telephone to Stillwick's, at once, ordering a car for eight o'clock? I shall meet you at the station. And, Fanshawe, don't

bother your mother to-night about her reasons for going to London. She'll tell you in good time. Don't ask her any questions to-night."

"Oh, all right," assented Fanshawe. "If it'll do her any good to go—it's not to a doctor, is it?" he added anxiously.

"No, not to a doctor," replied Georgina. "She'll be better when she's been to London. I'm going now," she concluded, glancing at Brixey. "Are you coming? Now, Fanshawe, remember all the arrangements. You'll find me at the station."

Once outside the house Brixey and Georgina walked away in silence for a time. At last she turned to him with a movement which suggested confidence.

"You won't expect me to tell you anything to-night?" she said. "What I've talked about with Mrs. Byfield must be absolutely private—yet."

"I've no right to expect anything, of course," answered Brixey. "I only hope that you've done her some good. She looked ill enough when we went in."

"I can tell you this," said Georgina. "I'm perfectly certain that Mrs. Byfield knows nothing whatever about Mr. Linthwaite's disappearance. She told me to tell you that from the time he left her, going away with Mr. Mesham, last Tuesday morning, she has never heard of or seen him."

"I took her son's assurance on that point," said Brixey. "I believe her. And that narrows things. Mesham is the man I'm going for!"

And how to get at him! That was the problem which worried Brixey. How to put a hand—the law's hand—on this man, and stay his evil course.

He was worrying about it when he went to sleep that Sunday night, and still worrying about it when he hurried downstairs next morning, in time to go with Georgina Byfield to the station. That was a bit of suddenly-conceived politeness on his part; but before the morning was out he was thinking what a piece of luck there had been in it.

Mrs. Byfield and Fanshawe were already on the platform when Georgina and Brixey walked into the station. Brixey saw at once that there was a curious but unmistakable look of relief on Mrs. Byfield's face. She looked as one looks who has been trying to decide on some eventful course, and has at last made decision, for good or ill.

And again he wondered what it was that she had told Georgina during their conversation of the previous evening. Whatever it might be, he quickly discovered that as yet Fanshawe knew nothing about it.

"I haven't the remotest notion what we're going to town for!" said Fanshawe, as he stood talking to Brixey apart from the two women. "But, I say, my mother would be obliged if you would do something for her. It's nothing much."

"Would you mind calling in at old Semmerby's office some time this morning, and telling him that we've gone to London and shan't be back for a few days, and that to-morrow's business—he'll know what that means—must stand over until we return?"

"Certainly," replied Brixey. "I'll call on him at ten o'clock."

The express came in just then, and he helped Fanshawe to find a first-class compartment and to get his companions into it with their light luggage. Fanshawe stood at the door when the three had got in.

"Hope to find you here when we get back," he said heartily, leaning out to Brixey. "I say, that was a rare good tip of yours, getting me into touch with Georgina last night. She's done my mother a heap of good already, and—hallo—look there! Behind you!"

Brixey twisted sharply round as Fanshawe, suddenly grinning, nodded at something behind him. And as he turned the express moved away, and Fanshawe called out a word or two about somebody looking jolly well surprised or sold.

Then Brixey saw who the somebody was. Mesham had just walked into the station, had caught sight of Fanshawe and of Mrs. Byfield and of Georgina, and now, oblivious of all else, he was staring after the departing train with startled eyes and a thoroughly crestfallen look.

CHAPTER XXIII

WARNING



It needed no particular exercise of observation on Brixey's part to convince him that Mesham was completely taken aback by what he had just seen. He remained standing just within the entrance to the platform, his eyes fixed on the disappearing train, his mouth open with surprise.

He was so oblivious of all else but what he was staring at that he did not even see Brixey, who stood only a few yards in front of him. But Brixey saw and watched him, and was quick to understand. Mesham's whole air was that of a man from whom something had been snatched on which he was keeping jealous guard.

There was anger in his look, but it was not so markedly evident as a bewildered surprise. He looked, in short, decided Brixey, precisely as Fanshawe had said—sold. And Brixey began to wonder why.

Mesham drew a long breath at last, and his gaze shifted from the train, now rounding the curve outside the station, to nearer objects. He suddenly caught sight of Brixey, and his cheeks flushed angrily.

Brixey returned his glance with a stare of cool, premeditated insolence, and when Mesham, with a scowl, turned away and walked up the platform to the bookstall, he deliberately followed. He was going to force himself upon Mesham whenever he could.

The London morning newspapers had just come in, and the bookstall boys were busily sorting and folding them. The manager, standing near, was turning over a copy of the *Sentinel*, and as Mesham went up, he looked up and smiled at him meaningly.

"Have a *Sentinel* this morning, Mr. Mesham?" he asked, holding up the paper. "There's your name in it, sir—and a good lot more. Working up a nice bit of copy out of this affair, aren't they?"

Mesham sneered and flung some coppers on the stall.

"Give me a *Daily Express*," he growled. "Do you think I want to read a damned rag like that? What the devil do I care what they say in the *Sentinel*?—all empty sensationalism!"

"There's a whole column of it, anyhow," said the manager, "and whoever's written it seems to know what he's writing about. He's not afraid of mentioning names, either!"

Brixey pushed himself in between Mesham and another customer and looked at the manager.

"Has he mentioned the name of one Charles Melsome yet?" he asked in a loud voice. "Has that come out?"

The manager took this for a casual and innocent inquiry, and not knowing his questioner from Adam, turned the *Sentinel* over again, and ran his eye down a well-leaded column, freely adorned with cross headings.

"Melsome, sir, Melsome?" he said. "I don't see that name. Perhaps you'll look for yourself, sir. Thank you."

Brixey laid down a penny and picked up the paper, purposely keeping his eyes fixed on it. He felt Mesham move quietly away; a moment later, looking up, he saw him leaving the station. At the door of the booking-office he turned and glanced back in Brixey's direction. Brixey caught his eye and grinned maliciously at him.

"That's to let you know that I know, my boy!" muttered Brixey. "Now go away and be very, very frightened!"

Mesham went off up the street, and Brixey, following leisurely at a distance, saw him presently meet a man with whom, after the exchange of a word or two, he turned down a quiet side alley that led towards the Cathedral close.

They were some distance along it when Brixey came up to its mouth, and he then could see no more of Mesham's companion than that he was a medium-sized man, who wore a somewhat loud-patterned Norfolk jacket. He had his back to Brixey, and while he and Mesham talked, standing by a blank wall half-way down the place into which they had retreated, Mesham was evidently so engrossed in what he was saying that he never looked in Brixey's direction.

And Brixey, highly gratified that he had given Mesham something to think about, and perhaps to talk about, went on to the "Mitre," and found Gaffkin and breakfast waiting for him.

"Brackett wants to see us together, after breakfast," remarked Gaffkin as they sat down. "He met me outside just now. He's very mysterious about something or other—some secret."

"Well, I'm thinking of going for Mesham. Can't you suggest some means of giving him infinite worry and annoyance, Gaffkin, without our breaking the law? I want, somehow, to goad that chap until he's fairly desperate!"

"By the by, I've had one little passage with him this morning," he added, and went on to tell Gaffkin of what had happened at the station. "I'd give a lot to know why Mesham looked so fearfully done when he saw Fanshawe Byfield and his mother sailing off before his eyes!" he concluded. "I never saw a man who so represented absolute disappointment of a queer sort."

Gaffkin had listened to all this with quiet attention.

"Aye!" he remarked meditatively. "It may be, Mr. Brixey, that in whatever plot or scheme or conspiracy it is that Mesham has in hand, for it's certain he has one, the Byfields, mother and son, were to play a part—probably an unwilling part. And so, when he saw them being removed—eh?"

"Do you know what I think, Gaffkin?" exclaimed Brixey. "I

think that chap ought to be watched. I think that we ought to concentrate on him—him! And I propose to give ourselves up to dogging his every footstep—following him wherever he goes.

"If he visits the 'Cavalier,' so will we, or one of us; if he leaves the town, we must certainly be after him. If we can only make things so hot for him as to force his hand——"

"We don't know yet what old Brackett has to tell us," said Gaffkin. "Better hear his story."

They found Brackett at the end of the stable-yard, inspecting his horses, and it was in a quiet corner of his harness-room that he told them his news.

"I was going to mention this last night," said Brackett, "but I was a bit busy and upset about Miss going off to London. Of course, it's quite right that she should go, under the circumstances, though what they are, I'm sure I've no idea—and I hadn't a chance of seeing you gentlemen.

"Well, it's this way—there's a few of us here in Selchester who have a little private club of our own—a few of the tradesmen and a few retired men, and two or three like myself—we have some very nice rooms over Walkerman's shop. Sunday night, gentlemen, is our best night for meeting—always a good number on Sunday night.

"I was there last night for an hour or two, as usual, and, of course, the talk ran a good deal on the disappearance of your uncle, Mr. Brixey—naturally, it's the topic of the town, just now. And as you'd expect, if there was one theory put out, there were a dozen!"

"Any of 'em any good?" asked Brixey.

"Some of 'em were pretty far-fetched," replied Brackett, with a laugh. "One man has an idea that Mr. Linthwaite will be found to be an absconding trustee. Another is certain that it's an elopement.

"The favourite notion, of course, is that the first police theory was right, and that the poor gentleman was murdered. But all this is neither here nor there, as regards what I'm going to tell you.

"You know, gentlemen," he went on, with a knowing wink, "there are men who keep close in company—quiet, reserved sort of men, who aren't going to say all they think or tell all they know, when there's what you might call a general, promiscuous talk going on in such places as club smoking-rooms.

"We've such men in our little club, and two in particular—Mr. Willett, the bookseller, and Mr. Archington, the wine and spirit merchant. I dare say you've noticed their places in the town?"

"I've seen them," assented Brixey.

"Very quiet, close men, both," continued the old landlord. "Not the sort to express opinions readily. Those of our members that I've just referred to were what one understands as ready talkers—you know.

"Now Mr. Willett and Mr. Archington, they're the sort that sits quiet, and smokes its pipe or cigar, and takes all in, and gives little out—eh? Well, last night these two were there in the corner that they generally get together in, and they heard all that was said without saying much themselves, as usual.

"But just before I was leaving Mr. Willett beckoned me to them, and they made room for me between their chairs. 'Brackett,' says Mr.

Willett, 'there's been a good deal of talk to-night about the disappearance of this Mr. Linthwaite. Now, you've got the gentleman's nephew at your house, haven't you?' 'Since Thursday evening,' says I, 'and very anxious about his uncle he is.'

" 'Well,' says Willett, 'talk and gossip about one's fellow-townfolk is not to my taste, nor to Mr. Archington's either, but you can take the young gentleman a message from both of us. Tell him,' he says, with a look at Archington, 'that if he likes to call on us to-morrow morning, we'll tell him something that may be a bit of help.'

" 'I will indeed!' says I, 'and glad he'll be to have it.' 'Well,' says Archington, 'it's to be strictly private, Brackett, and it mayn't be any help at all. But we both think there's something in it.'"

"I'll go and see them now," said Brixey. He motioned Gaffkin out into the yard. "While I'm gone," he said, "take a walk round and see if Mesham's about the town. And if he is, let him see, openly, that you're shadowing him. Do it boldly. Thrust it before his very eyes!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE BANK-NOTES

As Brixey walked out of the courtyard of the "Mitre" he caught sight of old Mr. Semmerby, who, on the opposite side of the way, was trotting along beneath the overhanging trees of the Cathedral close, evidently bound for his office, and he ran across the street and joined him.

"I've a message for you which I ought to have delivered half an hour ago," he said, with a glance at the clock on the Market Cross. "I'm afraid I'd forgotten all about it till I chanced to see you. From Mrs. Byfield. She asked me to let you know that she and her son have gone up to town and won't be back for a few days. That's all."

The old lawyer paused and stared hard at Brixey for a moment. That he was intensely surprised Brixey saw at once.

"Oh, and she said—at least, Fanshawe said—that to-morrow's business must stand over, and that you'd know what that means," he added. "I'd forgotten that bit."

Semmerby shook his head and stared at Brixey harder than ever.

"Mrs. Byfield and Fanshawe gone to London—for a few days?" he exclaimed. "When?"

"First train this morning," replied Brixey. "I saw them off."

"You saw them off?" said Semmerby, almost incredulously. "You?"

"The fact is," remarked Brixey, "after Fanshawe and I left you last night, he grew a bit confidential about his mother. Said she was ill, and wanted somebody to talk to. I took the liberty of suggesting his cousin, and it ended by his taking Miss Byfield up there. I went with them."

"Miss Byfield had a long talk with Mrs. Byfield. I haven't the remotest notion of what it was all about; neither had Fanshawe. But it ended, anyway, as I say—they all three went off to town this morning."

"All three!" exclaimed Semmerby. "What, has the girl gone with them?"

"Just so," answered Brixey.

Semmerby gave him another odd look and turned away.

"I haven't the slightest notion of what it means," he said over his shoulder as he moved off. "But," he paused and looked back, "have you heard any news about your own business?" he asked. "Your uncle?"

"Not a thing!" said Brixey.

The old lawyer nodded, shook his head, and went off, evidently bewildered, and Brixey, reflecting that this was, after all, not his own immediate job, went along the streets to find the men he wanted to see.

He knew both the places of which Brackett had spoken. Willett's shop in Chantry Passage was one of those establishments peculiar to ancient English towns—a storehouse of old books, old pictures, old prints, and similar antiquities.

Brixey had already looked in at its queer old windows more than once, and had promised himself a closer examination of the contents of windows and shop when he had more time at his disposal. He walked in now to find Willett, a quiet, reserved-looking elderly man, opening his letters at a desk which stood in the corner of a dark old room filled from floor to ceiling with every conceivable size of volume, from great folios to duodecimos.

Brixey, who had an innate love of books, regretted at once that he had just then something else than books to think of.

The bookseller glanced knowingly at his caller, and took off his spectacles as he came forward with a smile.

"Mr. Brixey, I think?" he said.

"Mr. Willett, I believe," responded Brixey. And seeing they were alone, he added, "Mr. Brackett tells me you can perhaps give me a bit of information?"

Willett smiled again and tapped Brixey on the shoulder.

"Strictly between ourselves," he said, in a half-whisper. "You know what things are in a little place like this. It doesn't do to talk about anybody. But I suppose most of your investigations about this gentleman who's missing are under the rose, eh?"

"Pretty much so," agreed Brixey. "It's a first-class sort of mystery, anyhow, Mr. Willett."

"I believe you!" said the bookseller. He opened a door at the back of the shop, and remarking to some person within that he was going out for half an hour, put on his hat and motioned Brixey to follow him. "We'll step round to Mr. Archington's," he said, as they walked down the passage. "Talk there more quietly."

Archington's establishment, a wine and spirit vaults, stood at the corner of one of the four main streets of Selchester. It was one of those places divided into a good many rooms—private bars, public bars, a counting-house, and so on. One flank of it ran down a side alley, and into this the bookseller turned, to slip into a side door which opened on a long narrow passage running to the rear of the building.

At a door at the end Willett knocked, and receiving a command to enter, ushered his companion into a little office, snugly and comfortably furnished, and evidently sacred to the proprietor, another quiet-looking, elderly man, who, at the sight of his visitors, nodded comprehendingly, and motioned the bookseller to shut the door behind him.

"This is Mr. Brixey," said Willett. "Come for a bit of quiet talk. I haven't told him anything yet. But he understands that whatever's said is between the three of us."

"Aye!" responded Archington, with a nod to the stranger. "Just so. To be sure! Mr. Linthwaite's nephew, I understand, sir? Just so. Queer business, Mr. Brixey—uncommonly so. You haven't heard anything as to your uncle's whereabouts?"

"No!" replied Brixey. "I'd be only too glad to!"

Archington, who was warming his back at a cheery fire, stood for a moment thoughtfully rubbing his chin. Then he pointed his visitors to two chairs which flanked the hearthrug, and turning to a sideboard, produced a bottle of sherry and silently filled three glasses, after which he took down a box of cigars from the mantelpiece and handed it round. He lighted a cigar himself, sipped thoughtfully from his glass and looked at Willett.

"Better tell your tale first," said Willett.

"Whatever either of you tell me," remarked Brixey, "I shall take in strict confidence. At the same time, if it's anything that will lead to my finding Mr. Linthwaite, you wouldn't object to coming forward if necessary?"

Archington, who had dropped into an easy chair, glanced at the book-seller.

"I don't think there'll be any need for any coming forward," he said. "I think we can put you on to something that'll solve matters. That's my opinion, anyway, and I think it's Willett's."

"Mine, certainly!" said Willett. "We can tell you of a fact—two facts—on which you can work. Go on, Archington."

"Well," said the wine merchant, turning to Brixey. "It's this—Willett and myself, from certain facts, believe that your uncle's locked up! If you want to know where—somewhere in those ruins at the old Priory.

"If you want to know who his gaolers are—the actual ones—Nat Lee and his daughter. But—there'll be somebody behind them. They're only turnkeys, as it were. And, in the case of the daughter, not very dependable."

"You've grounds for this supposition?" suggested Brixey.

"Good ones!" answered Archington. "Now, as to mine. First, last Wednesday noon, I was in my order office alone—the man who's usually there had gone out to his dinner. In came that girl of Lee's—Debbie, as they call her. I hadn't seen much of her since she came home from London, but I knew her well enough, because for a while, before she went to that milliner's place in town, she was parlourmaid at my house; of course, she's smartened up a lot since then, though she was always a forward young minx.

"Well, she came up to the counter as large as life. 'Mr. Archington,' she says, 'I want to buy some claret. I've not been well, and the doctor says I'm anæmic and I ought to drink some good claret, so I want to try if it'll do any good.' Well, of course, I showed her a wine list, and pointed out a very good claret at three shillings a bottle. I also recommended some Burgundy that I have at the same price.

"But, no. Neither was good enough for my lady! 'While I'm at

it,' she says, 'I'll have the best.' And before I could say more she put her finger on the price list against one of the best wines I have—some very fine Château Lafitte——"

Brixey started and whistled, and the other two men glanced at each other significantly.

"At six-and-six a bottle," continued Archington. "'I'll have half a dozen of that,' she said. 'You'll send them up for me, Mr. Archington?' and she pulled out a purse and handed me a five-pound note.

"Well, of course, it wasn't my affair if Debbie Lee liked to buy claret at six-and-six a bottle, and I gave her the change, and promised to send the wine up at once. But I never believed it was for her, for I never saw a young woman look less anæmic in my life. And, to cut matters short, I put that fiver safely away."

Archington glanced at Willett as he came to an end of his story, and the bookseller nudged Brixey's elbow.

"I've got a five-pound note from the same quarter, too," he said. "And I got it about the same time—last Wednesday. This same young woman came into my shop just before one o'clock. I did just know her, for it's not so long since that I bought some old prints from her father.

"She'd a scrap of paper in her hand. 'Mr. Willett,' she says, as candidly as you please, 'there's a lady that I know in London who's interested in these old places like Selchester, an invalid lady that's nothing to do but read, and she's asked me if I can buy her any of the books on this list? Have you any of them?' 'What are they?' I asked.

"She gave me the scrap of paper then. It was part of a page evidently torn out of some second-hand bookseller's catalogue—some bookseller who specialises in topography and local history. There were several items relating to Selchester, and some of them were ticked off in pencil.

"'Yes,' I said, 'I've some of these, but as you see, they're pretty expensive.' 'Oh, it doesn't matter!' she says. 'She's a wealthy lady—one of the customers where I worked in London—and she's sent me a five-pound note to lay out.' So I showed her what I had—Blenkinridge's 'History of Selchester' in two volumes, and Dean Dewberry's 'Annals and Collections of Selchester Cathedral,' and Raycastle's 'Chartulary of Selchester Priory,' and one or two small things—they came to well over four pounds.

"She gave me a five-pound note. I have it in my pocket-book now. I offered to pack the books for her and to send them by parcel post, but she carried them off.

"Now," concluded Willett, "I believed the young woman's story at the time, but when I heard of Mr. Linthwaite's disappearance, and that he was a well-known antiquary, and that he'd been seen about the Priory grounds last Tuesday morning, I—well, I began to think. And on Sunday Mr. Archington and I compared notes, and there you are!"

"What does Mr. Brixey think?" asked Archington, slyly.

Brixey, who seemed to have relaxed into a brown study suddenly woke up.

"Let me see those five-pound notes," he demanded. "That's the first thing!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE BANK CONFIRMS

THE bookseller produced an old-fashioned pocket-book, and, after a little searching among its contents, extracted a five-pound note, new, crisp and crackling. Archington at the same moment unlocked a drawer and took another from beneath some papers. In silence they handed the notes to Brixey, who glanced straight at the numbers.

"X 6r 23784," he muttered. "X 6r 23785. A moment—I'll write those numbers down. Thank you, gentlemen," he continued, as he produced a notebook and pencil.

"That's the first direct clue I've had! You've hit the target without a doubt! I'm about as sure as I can be that this is not the first time I've handled these two notes."

"You yourself?" asked Archington.

"I myself!" affirmed Brixey. "My uncle and I bank at the same bank—the Amalgamated Counties, in Fleet Street. A week since last Saturday I cashed a cheque for him there. I took a hundred pounds of it in five-pound notes, all of which he'd have on him when he left town. If these are not two of them, I shall be much surprised. But I'll know definitely before the day's out."

"And if they are?" asked Willett.

"I want to have your advice on that matter," said Brixey. "Now, you said, Mr. Archington, that your impression is that my uncle is locked up in the old Priory. Do you think that possible? Possible, I mean, that a man could be locked up there for several days without it leaking out? Do you mean to say that it's a place in which it's possible to imprison in that way?"

Archington pointed to the bookseller.

"Willett knows more about that than I do," he answered. "I'm not as familiar with our old places as he is."

"Well, it is possible," said Willett as Brixey turned to him. "Unless you've been all over those ruins, Mr. Brixey, you'd be astonished in what a good state of preservation they are, and what a lot of room there is in them. Two or three resolute and determined people, bent on doing it, could keep a man prisoner there for as long as they liked."

"There's the old tower, for instance. The base of that is Lee's dwelling-house, put in repair some years ago, when the museum was started, for the caretaker to live in. Above it there are several rooms and places, all in good architectural repair, with strong doors, and so on."

"In one of them a lot of corporation records and things are stored, but it's very rarely that that room is visited. And there are rooms above that. Yes, I certainly think a man might be locked up there, and nobody the wiser."

"But, think!" objected Brixey. "Those Priory grounds are visited all day long! Do you mean to say that a man so imprisoned couldn't attract attention from the windows, couldn't shout to those below?"

"There are rooms in that tower, sir," answered Willett, "in which the windows are so small and set so high in the walls above the flooring that a man couldn't get at them."

"What about lights at night in these rooms, or in one of them?" suggested Brixey. "Wouldn't that attract attention?"

"Do you think the gaolers would allow lights?" asked Willett dryly. "No! Besides, there are one or two places in there that don't touch the outer walls—inner rooms. That's one of the most massive towers in England."

"Your theory, of course," Brixey concluded as he rose, "is that Mr. Linthwaite is being kept there a prisoner until—what?"

"Ah, that's it!" said Archington, with a laugh. "Until—what? Well, I should say, until something's taken place that his presence in this town was likely to prevent."

"That's it!" agreed Willett. "He turned up just when somebody didn't want him. And so—he's been quietly interned."

"How do you—how would you—account for it that if he's locked up in that way he's free to buy wine and books?" asked Brixey. "That's queer!"

"Not a bit," said Archington. "He got the girl to manage it—probably paid her well to get him a few comforts. She's a sharp young minx, and it looks to me as if he'd been told that he'd got to stop where he was for some days, and so determined to make the best of it. I noticed you started when I said that Debbie Lee ordered Château Lafitte?"

"My uncle's favourite wine, that's all," answered Brixey.

"There you are!" exclaimed Archington triumphantly. "Well, what'll you do? Go to the police?"

"No," replied Brixey. "Not yet, anyway. I'll satisfy myself about these notes, and then I shall consider further operations. I feel pretty comfortable now about one thing."

"From what you tell me, my uncle, if he is a prisoner, is not likely to be either in chains or on bread and water. That's something to know. And now I'm going to wire to the bank."

Archington pointed to a sheaf of telegram forms on his desk, and Brixey wrote out his message:

*Manager, Amalgamated Counties Bank, Fleet Street, London.—
I cashed a cheque for Mr. John Linthwaite with you on May 12th.
Please wire me the numbers of the five-pound notes which you gave me
in exchange.—Richard Brixey, Mitre Hotel, Selchester.*

"You shall know what I hear about this," he said, as he went off. "In the meantime, silence all round!"

He handed in the wire at the post office and then walked back to the "Mitre," expecting to encounter Gaffkin either in the streets or about the hotel. But Gaffkin was not in evidence; Brackett, the barmaid said, had gone out on business, and Brixey was left to his thoughts.

On one point Brixey's mind was already made up—he was going to know the secret of the Priory before the day was out. He hung around the "Mitre," wishing that Gaffkin would turn up, so that he could consult with him. But noon was chimed and rung from all the city clocks

and from the great bell in the cathedral tower, and no Gaffkin appeared.

Then, at half-past twelve, as Brixey was moodily strolling up and down near the Market Cross, keeping an eye on the ends of four streets along any one of which Gaffkin might have appeared, he saw Empidge come out of the "Mitre" courtyard, look round, catch sight of him, and point him out to a railway porter who carried an envelope in his hand. The man came hurrying up to him.

"Mr. Brixey, sir?" he asked. "Gentleman down at the station asked me to bring you this, sir. No answer."

Brixey took a dirty and crumpled envelope from its bearer and extracted a scrap of paper on which Gaffkin had hastily scrawled a message:

"Found out that M. left by 9.41 for Brighton; going after him by 12.13. Will keep you informed by wire of what I am doing.—G."

Brixey gave the porter a shilling and was turning away when a thought occurred to him.

"Here!" he said, calling the man back. "Do you know Mr. Mesham?"

"Mr. Mesham—him that lives at Strike's, sir?" answered the porter. "Yes, sir, well enough by sight, sir."

"Did you happen to see him go away by the 9.41 this morning?" asked Brixey. "You did. Well, was he alone?"

"As far as I know, he was, sir," replied the man. "I saw him in a first-class smoker, sir—hadn't no one with him that I noticed."

Brixey nodded in silence, and turned into the "Mitre." He was disappointed at not being able to communicate his news to Gaffkin, but a little reflection made him determined not to tell even Brackett of it. He had already made up his mind that he would not share it with Crabbe and the police—yet.

Gaffkin would probably return from Brighton before night; if not, he would visit the Priory alone. And while he lunched he thought out a plan of action. Know whether his uncle was immured or not in those ruins he would before he slept.

Three o'clock brought Brixey a wire from the bank in London. After one glance at it he walked over to Chantry Passage and showed it to Willett.

"There you are!" he said. "Just as I expected. You see, the twenty five-pound notes I got in exchange for Mr. Linthwaite's cheque were numbered X 6r 23768 to X 6r 23787, both numbers inclusive. Your note and Mr. Archington's are X 6r 23784 and X 6r 23785. Nothing could be clearer!"

"What are you going to do?" asked Willett.

"Without saying anything to anybody," answered Brixey, "I'm going to pay a quiet visit to that spot this evening, after dark. Look here. Are you a yearly subscriber to those grounds? You are? Then it would be a help if you'd lend me your key. I want to get in on the quiet."

"You don't think you're running into danger?" asked Willett.

"Possibly, but it will only be for about the twentieth time," replied Brixey. "That's merely incidental. I'll keep you posted."

He lounged away the afternoon around and within the cathedral. And as he sat down to dinner that evening, still alone, a second wire arrived from Gaffkin. Mesham was in company with an elderly man, much resembling himself, at Brighton, and Gaffkin was carefully watching all their movements.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE GREEN PURSE

BRIXEY, before sitting down to dinner that evening, had been out in the town, doing a little necessary shopping. Had Crabbe followed him from shop to shop his police-inspector's mind might have attached suspicion to Brixey's purchases.

For at one shop Brixey bought an electric lamp of the best make obtainable, and at another a pair of cloth shoes, thickly soled with felt; at a third he purchased a small but eminently business-like revolver and had it fitted with cartridges.

When he went out of the "Mitre" after darkness had fallen over Selchester he had all these things in his pockets, ready for use.

In the course of his professional career Brixey had more than once played the part of a spy. More than once, too, he had run himself into queer situations. It was no empty boast on his part when he told Willett that if he risked danger on this occasion it would only be for the twentieth time.

But he was a cool hand, and full of resourcefulness and of ideas, and he had already worked out the plans which he intended to follow that evening.

He knew from observation that after dark the grounds of the old Priory were closed; accordingly there would be no one about to witness his movements. His notion was to get in there, unobserved, and to do a little quiet spying round the caretaker's dwelling.

There might be windows with undrawn curtains; there might be something to hear at doors; some accidental circumstance might ensue which would be of immense value. And if none of these things materialised he meant to walk boldly in on the father and daughter and tax Debbie Lee with having been in possession of two five-pound notes belonging to Mr. John Linthwaite.

Everything was very quiet at the far extremities of the little town. Such Selchester folk as went abroad at night always congregated in the centre of the place, around the old Market Cross; up there, near the North Bar and its adjacent walls, there was nobody about.

While he waited at a corner opposite the "Lame Hussar," two sounds broke the silence. Behind him, down a narrow side street which his wanderings in the town had taught him to know as leading beneath the walls to the western extremity of Selchester, and so to the high road which ran towards Portsmouth, he heard the coming of a motor-car.

It stopped a little distance away down this street; moved again. Brixey, stepping a yard or two into the roadway, saw it turn round—a car with back and front lights. It pulled up and remained stationary by the kerb, and at that moment he heard the second sound.

At the end of the narrow entry which led past the "Lame Hussar" to the entrance to the Priory grounds his quick ear caught the closing of a gate. And a second later all the clocks of Selchester, from that of the cathedral to those of the various small churches, struck nine.

Brixey slipped noiselessly into the shelter of the deep porch of an old house behind him. He had seen two figures coming along from the Priory gates. In another moment they passed him, walking swiftly, and in the faint light from the windows of the tavern he recognised them. Lee and his daughter.

Brixey put his head out of the porch and watched. They were moving on as silently as swiftly. He strained his ears to catch a word from either as they went by, and caught nothing.

But his eyes had better luck than his ears. He saw that Lee was overcoated and capped as if for a journey; that Debbie was similarly apparelled. And Lee tugged a heavy portmanteau, while his daughter carried two smaller bags, one in each hand. This, clearly, decided Brixey, was a departure, and perhaps a hurried one.

As he now expected, father and daughter crossed the end of the main street, hurrying their steps as they passed the gas-lamps at the corners, and made for the waiting motor-car down the side alley. He saw them get into it, saw the driver move round to the front, heard him start his engine; a few seconds later the car went swiftly away.

And Brixey knew then that the coast was clear for him, and he wondered if he had been wise in letting these two highly-suspicious characters depart without questions. For he was sure by that time that whatever share Miss Deborah Lee had taken in the mystery which centred in the Priory, now so dark and silent before him, her father was a participant in.

But, after all, the going-away left him free to explore, unchecked, probably unwatched, unless, indeed, there were other conspirators left behind.

After a few moments of reflection, Brixey slipped along the street to the Priory gates and let himself into the grounds by means of Willett's key. In there everything was dark and very quiet. Nevertheless, he wished to be quiet himself, and once inside the walls he turned aside to a rustic arbour which he had noticed on his previous visits, and there took off his boots and put on the felt-soled shoes.

Having felt that the revolver in his hip-pocket was loose and handy, and that the electric lamp was ready for immediate pulling out, Brixey went away up the broad gravelled walk in the direction of the ruins.

There was not a gleam of light from the front of the caretaker's house. Silent as a shadow Brixey glided across the front, peering in at the windows, listening at the doors.

The whole place was tomb-like in its quietness. The windows were fast and the door under the portico was fast. If the father and daughter had left by that entrance they had taken the key with them.

But Brixey, in his previous observations of the Priory and its grounds, had noticed that there was a back entrance to the caretaker's house. The house itself had been fashioned and rearranged out of the lower stories of the great, square tower of the Priory.

At the rear of the tower, among the ruins of one of the transepts, there was a yard, from which admittance could be had to the caretaker's

premises. He made his way through the old masses of fallen masonry to this, passed through a hedge of laurel bushes, and entered the yard.

And there, in one of the lower windows, he saw a faint gleam of light, evidently from a fire. To make his way to that window was the work of a moment. When he looked cautiously through the bottom panes he was astonished to see that on the hearth of what was evidently the living-room of the house quite a respectable fire was burning.

Clearly, then, the departure of the Lees had been an unexpected one. The fire had surely been made up for the evening. But there was another piece of evidence on that point. In the firelight he saw that the table was spread for supper. He saw, too, that the meal had been interrupted.

So convinced was Brixey by this time that the place was empty, that he went away from the window towards the back door. But as he crossed the bit of yard his foot struck something soft, soft yet firm, which lay on the pavement in his path.

There was a peculiar sensation about this contact in the dark, and he stopped and put down a hand—to encounter something warm and yet suspiciously still.

He had a swift intuition of what this was before even he drew out his lamp and, carefully shading it within his jacket, bent down to look. There at his feet lay an Airedale terrier, dead, but not long dead.

The poor brute was warm. Not so long since its life had coursed joyously enough through its veins, and Brixey uttered a malediction on the folk who had so callously taken it. But there was no use in indulging in sentiment, and he switched off his lamp and went on to the door.

That, of course, he said to himself, was the dog of which Fanshawe Byfield had spoken—the excellent house-dog. Why had Lee poisoned it just before leaving? That, surely, was another proof of hasty departure.

Had the dog been left alive he would, even if chained up when Lee and his daughter went away, have followed in their tracks on his release. Therefore, argued Brixey, it was very evident that they wished to prevent any risk, to obviate any chance of being followed.

Folk who do not wish to be followed, he further argued, have some very good reason for desiring to escape pursuit. That, at any rate, seemed clear.

With a quietness that would have done credit to a professional burglar, Brixey crept along to the kitchen door and tried the latch. He was not surprised to find that it tipped easily. The door was unlocked and unbolted. He was inside it in another second and had glided into the living-room and through it to a little hall which divided it from the front of the house.

There in the darkness he stood for a while, listening. At first not a sound came from the heights above, but presently a breath of chilly air blew down on him, and he knew that somewhere up above him there was a window open. He heard a slight rattle of its frame in a casement.

On that slight breeze, too, came the hooting of an owl in the trees outside the ruins—a sound that fitted well with the character of the old place and with the circumstances. And, curious and eager as he was, Brixey felt a certain sense of eeriness when he heard that hooting, and his heart beat a little quicker as he groped about him, found a stair, and quietly tiptoed up it.

He scarcely knew why he was adopting a mouse-like quiet in this place, which, he was perfectly sure, was absolutely free of its usual denizens. But was his uncle interned somewhere in the upper regions? He was going to search that tower from bottom to top, now that he was in it.

When he came to the first landing he cautiously turned on the gleam of his electric lamp and, shrouding it with his jacket, looked round him. A door stood open on his right hand, and he slipped into the room behind it.

Miss Debbie Lee's room this, evidently; evidently, too, left by its tenant in some haste. Drawers had been left half closed, boxes were standing about with unclosed lids; female wearing apparel was thrown here and there about the bed and the chairs.

And on the dressing-table, over which Brixey carefully shone his lamp, lay an oblong green morocco purse, a thing of some size, half hidden beneath a handkerchief which had either been carelessly thrown or purposely placed on it.

Brixey set down his lamp at the corner of the dressing-table and opened that purse. And he instantly knew that its owner had gone off in such a hurry that she had forgotten it. For there, in one division, were bank-notes; in another, gold.

In a third was a mere scrap of paper, and it was to that, rather than to the gold and the notes, that Brixey gave his attention.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE CRY ACROSS THE WATER

It was a bit of crumpled, dirty paper, a scrap evidently torn from a small memorandum-book, at which Brixey looked. On it were a few words scribbled in pencil in a man's handwriting—an address. Whether it signified much or little, Brixey instantly memorised it.

Wolmark's Private Hotel, Trinity Square, E.C.

He repeated it once or twice and packed it away in a safe corner of his brain for future use if need arose. Wolmark's Private Hotel, Trinity Square—down by the Tower, and near the Docks.

What was an address like that doing in Debbie Lee's purse, there in Selchester?

But before Brixey had time to consider this problem his attention was otherwise occupied. Outside the room in which he stood there was a landing, and on that landing a window was open. All the time he had been there he had heard the hooting of the owls in the old trees across the grounds.

Now he heard something else—the steady throb of the engine of a motor-car. That sound drew nearer and nearer; slowed down, ceased. He knew it to have come from the road outside; knew the car to have pulled up close to the gates of the Priory, and he instantly slipped the bit of paper back into the purse, laid the purse where he had found it, half covered by the handkerchief, and turned off the light of his lamp.

The next instant he heard footsteps on the drive below—somebody

was running towards the house. And he knew then that Debbie Lee had missed her purse, and was either hurrying back herself or had sent somebody to fetch it.

Brixey, in glancing round the room, had noticed a curtain which hung from a shelf in an alcove. To slip behind that curtain was the work of an instant.

Another instant and he heard the hurrying steps in the yard beneath, then in the living-room below, then on the stair. And he knew then that it was a man who had come back for the green purse.

The man came running fast up the stairs. Brixey heard him panting. He turned straight into the room. Brixey saw his figure outlined against the grey light of the curtainless window. But the next instant the man struck a match; it flared up brightly.

And then the watcher knew that he had indeed made a discovery. The man standing before him, glancing eagerly at the contents of the dressing-table, was, without doubt, the man whom the Newhaven landlord had described—a very ordinary-looking fellow to whom an unmistakable cast or squint gave a sinister appearance.

Also, Brixey was certain that he was the man to whom he had seen Mesham talking that very morning in the side-alley when he followed Mesham from the station after the Byfields had gone off to London. He knew him by his coat; its cut, its loud pattern.

In the same instant in which Brixey made these discoveries the man caught sight of the purse and grabbed it with a muttered exclamation of relief. The next instant he had flung down the match, run out of the room, and was flying down the stairs; the next he was out of the house again, and running down the drive.

Brixey then emerged from his hiding-place, and, hurrying to the open window on the landing, put out his head and shoulders, and listened. A moment later he heard the motor-car's engine begin to throb—another moment and it had gone off once more into the night.

And once more silence fell over the old place, broken now and then by the mournful hooting of the owls.

Brixey thought a good deal to that eerie accompaniment. That Lee and his daughter were in flight he was certain. That the squint-eyed man was in collusion or league or conspiracy with them seemed pretty positive. But what was it all about? Had it anything to do with the mystery which seemed to centre in Mrs. Byfield? Was it in relation to, or in consequence of, the disappearance of Mr. Linthwaite?

Without doubt the man who had just been to fetch the green purse was the man who had sent that mysterious telegram from Newhaven, and had torn up and thrown away the actual message written by Mr. Linthwaite himself. Therefore he must have been in touch with Mr. Linthwaite in the first day or two of his disappearance, and probably ever since.

And if he, as now seemed probable, was running away with the Lees, where was Mr. Linthwaite, who had probably been in their custody?

That last question seemed, after all, the immediately important one, and Brixey determined to continue his search. And now, feeling sure that nobody else would come to the old tower, he turned on the light of

his lamp and boldly and carefully explored his surroundings. Before he left it, he was going to make certain whether Mr. Linthwaite was in that tower or not.

There were yet upper regions to explore, and Brixey climbed what was evidently the last flight of stair.

And before he knew of it he had set foot in what he very quickly assured himself to have been his uncle's prison.

The stair terminated on a narrow landing whereon was an ancient archway in which a door, clamped and ironed, was deeply set. That door was open. The vaulted chamber behind it was empty. But there was a door in the farther wall of that chamber, also open, through which Brixey instantly strode.

And he had not thrown the gleam of his lamp round the small room inside it for more than a few observant seconds than he knew that one part of the mystery was solved. Here, without a doubt, Mr. Linthwaite had been immured.

But he was not there! The place was empty and silent. Yet that he had been locked up there Brixey never doubted after his first rapid inspection—nay, he was certain that he had been there recently. And now that he had settled that point he proceeded to take a careful look round this curious jail.

An oil lamp stood on a table set against one of the bare walls. He lighted it and turned it up to the full. In its fairly strong light he saw how it was that Mr. Linthwaite had been incarcerated in this place without anyone knowing outside the circle—large or small—of his jailers.

The room was some twelve feet square in floor space, but of a considerable height. Its two windows were set high in the walls, much too high for a tall man to reach, even if standing on chair or table. The door was strong, thick, and closely set in its framework. Brixey saw that when it was closed the room must be sound-proof.

These facts showed him that a prisoner confined in the room would have little chance of attracting the attention of any person outside. He turned from them to the proofs of his uncle's presence.

The place had been fitted up as a bed-sitting-room, and was not uncomfortably furnished. A thick, if somewhat timeworn, carpet had been spread on the floor, a camp-bed placed in one corner, a roomy arm-chair stood by a table set in the centre. On another and smaller table lay books, newspapers, periodicals.

Brixey turned them over—the last newspapers were of that day's date; the books were those which Debbie Lee had bought from Willett. Writing materials lay near. A quantity of manuscript revealed the fact that Mr. Linthwaite had solaced the hours of imprisonment by making copious notes from the "History of Selchester." There was no mistaking his somewhat crabbed penmanship.

And ranged on the same table, in company with a cruet-stand and certain table appointments, stood the half-dozen bottles of Château Laffitte which Archington had spoken of; three of them were still uncorked.

A sudden fear sprang up in Brixey's mind as he took in all these various details and proofs. Was it possible that the evidently sudden

and hurried departure of the Lees and the squint-eyed man had brought about some tragedy?

The Airedale terrier was lying dead in the yard. Was it possible that Mr. Linthwaite was lying dead, too, somewhere among these ruins? It might be that these folk had been faced with some situation which made them desperate—desperate enough to take life.

And at that thought and its dreadful possibilities Brixey hastily ran down the stairs, left the Priory grounds, and hurried along the streets to the police station. Now, at last, the police would be of use.

Crabbe was in his office, writing letters, when Brixey was shown in to him. He looked up in astonishment.

"News?" he asked.

"Look here!" exclaimed Brixey. "We've got to stir—quick! Never mind all the particulars. I'll tell you them later. But I've made a discovery.

"My uncle's been locked in a room in the top of that tower at the old Priory. There's no doubt about it, as you'll see for yourself. But he's not there now, and those Lees are gone—both father and daughter. They've gone off to-night, in a motor-car. I saw them go.

"Now, something's been done with my uncle before they left. We've got to find out what. Get some of your men and come up there. I'll tell you a lot more as we go along."

Crabbe got to his feet and made for the door. But before he could open it the policeman who had just ushered Brixey in came back with an expression of face which betokened news.

"Well?" demanded Crabbe. "What now?"

The policeman, obviously excited, jerked a thick thumb in the direction of the front office.

"There's a man there from one of those cottages up North Bar way, sir," he said. "Outside the walls—between the Priory grounds and the lake. He says there's somebody on that island in the middle of the lake shouting for help!"

Brixey started forward. In his observations of the big sheet of water behind the Priory grounds he had noticed the small, thickly-wooded island of which the policeman spoke, and now a sudden light flashed across his field of mental vision. He clapped the inspector on the shoulder.

"Come on at once!" he exclaimed. "I've an idea what that means. Come! Bring some men. Get this man outside to show us the nearest way."

Ten minutes later, at the head of half a dozen men, Brixey was standing on the edge of the black surface of the lake, striving to peer into the gloom. Not even his sharp eyes could make out the island, half a mile away, but it needed little acuteness of hearing to catch a cry which came through the night.

"Help there! Help!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

MAROONED

BRIXEY gripped the inspector by the arm as he heard that cry.

"There you are!" he said. "Found! That's Mr. Linthwaite's voice. Now, then—how to get to him? What is this island? Do people go across to it?"

"There's a hut on it that's used for wild-fowl shooting," answered Crabbe. "And there ought to be a punt somewhere about here. This is a queer business, Mr. Brixey," he went on as they began to search the bank of the lake. "How on earth does this poor gentleman come to be there?"

"Never mind that," exclaimed Brixey. "He'll tell us all that later. Coming!" he shouted as the cry for help came again. "Wave one of those lanterns to let him know he's heard," he continued, turning to the knot of police, who were turning the lights of their bull's-eye lamps on the reeds and sedges in an endeavour to find the punt. "Where is this boat you're talking about?"

One of the policemen, a little in advance, suddenly stopped and turned his light on the still water at the edge of the lake.

"There it is, sir!" he said. "And scuttled, too! That's no use."

The other men gathered round, turning their lamps on the foundered punt, which lay a foot or so beneath the surface.

"That's been done on purpose!" remarked Crabbe. "I see what it's been. Whoever took Mr. Linthwaite across to that island came back alone and scuttled that punt, so that it couldn't be used in a hurry. And I don't know where there's another boat!"

The man who had run down to the police station with the news came forward.

"Jim Pybus has a bit of a boat down at his garden steps, Mr. Crabbe," he said. "'Tain't much of a size, but he goes about this here water in it, fishing."

"Come on! Where is it?" urged Brixey.

The man led them along the side of the lake to a point where one or two isolated cottages stood on the shore, and at the foot of some stone steps showed his companions a tiny skiff tied up to a post.

By dint of shouting beneath his window its owner was brought down. He regarded the posse of men with sleepy wonder, and shook his head.

"Ain't fit for no more than two to be in that there vessel!" he said. "I don't go out with no more than one in she, any times. 'Tain't safe, nohow, for more. Can't take all of 'ee across there."

"Let him go by himself," said Brixey. "Look here, my man. There's a gentleman stranded across there on that island. Go and fetch him. Bring him safe over, and there's a sovereign for you."

"All right, master—hoping he ain't a very heavy 'un," said the man. "Ain't crippled, nor nothing, is he?"

"I don't know what state he's in," answered Brixey. "Get across there and find out, anyway."

The boat-owner got into his tiny craft and pulled away into the gloom, and the company on the bank stood casting their lights in his direction until he vanished. Crabbe took off his cap and wiped his forehead.

"This beats all!" he said in an undertone to Brixey. "Never heard the like of it. Who can have put him over there? Those Lees, now—they can't have done that themselves. Who's been in at it?"

"You'll hear more presently, Inspector," answered Brixey. "Unless I'm mistaken you'll hear still more to-morrow, and I sincerely hope you'll have the pleasure of making some arrests. But I'm a bit doubtful on that point, unless——"

"There's a light on the island now!" interrupted one of the policemen. "Gentleman's struck a match, I think."

A tiny spark of blue flame glimmered for a second or two far off across the water. It died out, and was presently succeeded by another. The captive was evidently showing his whereabouts to the man in the boat.

And in a few minutes more the watchers on the bank heard the splash of the returning oars and voices from the boat—that of the boatman low and monosyllabic, that of his passenger high-pitched and loquacious.

"That's my uncle!" said Brixey, with a sigh of relief. "He's all right! I know that from his voice. Well, that's a consolation, anyhow!"

Mr. Linthwaite, sitting very uncomfortably in the stern of the tiny boat, and gripping the timbers on either side of him, was something of a picture as he came into the glare of the policemen's lamps. A somewhat prim, precise, and old-fashioned-looking gentleman, his outward appearance was now rendered odd and even amusing by the fact that he wore an ordinary blanket pinned about his shoulders and had a cheap cloth cap, two sizes too small for him, perched on the crown of his head.

He wore pince-nez on the bridge of his high, inquisitive nose; the black ribbon attached to them dangling gracefully across his blanket. He stared wonderingly around the ring of faces on the bank, and as Brixey stepped forward to give him a helping hand his wonder found vent in an exclamation.

"Bless my soul!" he said, as his nephew pulled him through the reeds and set him on the bank. "You here? Dear me! Most extraordinary. I fear your arrangements have been upset, eh? This is not—not accidental?"

Brixey slapped the blanketed shoulders.

"I've been here looking for you ever since last Thursday," he answered. "The whole place has been turned upside down for you. You're going to cost me five hundred pounds! Where have you been?"

Mr. Linthwaite removed his pince-nez, and waved them in the direction whence he had just been ferried.

"Since a little while after dark this evening," he remarked calmly, "marooned—I think that is the correct term?—marooned on a small island, across there.

"I wish I'd had one of these lamps with me. I found some ancient stones on that island on which, I am sure, are inscriptions. But I only had one box of matches—growing low, too.

"So you are really here?" he continued, glancing almost dubiously at his nephew. "Didn't you receive my wire last week? I expected to join you at Winchester."

"Look here!" broke in Brixey. "Who put you on that island to-night? Never mind me—we'll talk about that later. Come now—who was it?"

Mr. Linthwaite resumed his glasses and looked speculatively round the ring of interested faces.

"Um!" he said. "An inspector of police, I perceive; also several constables. Ah! I think we will defer explanations until—— Shall we adjourn to the 'Mitre'? Perhaps the inspector will accompany us? The fact is, a little refreshment will not do me any harm."

Brixey slipped a sovereign into the hand of the boatman, another into that of the man who had first heard Mr. Linthwaite's cry for help. The procession set forth, Brixey and Crabbe going first with the recent captive behind them; the constables following, highly diverted by their view of Mr. Linthwaite from the rear.

At the police station they fell out. The three in front marched on in silence until they came to the 'Mitre.' Not until they were in the private sitting-room did Mr. Linthwaite remove his blanket and his cap. That done, he glanced significantly at his nephew.

"On this occasion, Dick," he said solemnly, "I think—whisky!"

Instead of ringing the bell, Brixey went round to the bar parlour in person. Brackett sat by the hearth reading the evening paper, in which he was so absorbed that he did not hear Brixey's footstep until his guest clapped him on the shoulder.

"Got him!" said Brixey triumphantly. "He's in the little parlour. Come in, and bring a decanter of your best whisky with you."

Brackett got up with marvellous alacrity for a man of his age. He stared at Brixey open-eyed.

"You don't mean to say Mr. Linthwaite's found!" he exclaimed. "Bless me! There's a most amazing theory about his disappearance in that paper!"

"I'll consider it later," laughed Brixey. "He's here, and he's all right, though a bit shivery."

Brackett gazed wonderingly on his elder guest as he carried decanter and glasses into the parlour, and his hand trembled as he put it in Mr. Linthwaite's outstretched palm.

"I was never so glad to see anything in my life, gentlemen!" he said fervently as he glanced from uncle to nephew. "Never! I—I hope you're no worse, sir?"

"Except for a slight and merely temporary feeling of chilliness, my good sir, I am, I believe, no worse," answered the returned captive. "I have eaten, and drunk, and smoked, and read—very profitably—and written—also profitably—and I am quite well."

"A little more exercise, perhaps? The fact is, until to-night, I have had none—not even that allowed to prisoners of the usual brand," he added, with a sly glance at Crabbe. "I wasn't even allowed out of my cell!"

"Then you have been locked up, sir?" suggested Brackett. "Dear me!"

Brixey touched the landlord's elbow and pointed to the table.

"Give us each a drink," he commanded. He presently handed a glass to his uncle, and, giving him a meaning look, nodded in Crabbe's direction.

"I think you had better tell us something," he said suggestively. "This is, or ought to be, a police job, and the inspector there is waiting for information."

Linthwaite took a pull at his glass, and, dropping into an easy chair, looked round and shook his head.

"I should be very glad," he said dryly, "if somebody could give me some information! I don't know what any of you know, but I do know that since Tuesday afternoon I have been a prisoner under the most extraordinary and mystifying circumstances."

"You don't know why you were imprisoned?" exclaimed Brixey. "Come, now, is that in the nature of a legal quibble, or are we to take it in a literal sense?"

"Take it as you please, my dear lad," replied Linthwaite. "I merely repeat what I have said. All I know is that since last Tuesday I have been imprisoned, that three particular persons acted as my gaolers, that they released me to-night—by marooning me on that island—and that I am here! But——"

Brixey interrupted his uncle with some impatience.

"This is important!" he said. "Just tell us! Was it Mesham who locked you up in that tower at the Priory? Did he cause it? Was he there? Have you seen him?"

Linthwaite shook his head as if puzzled by these questions.

"Mesham?" he answered. "Mesham? Ah, you mean—yes, I know the man you mean. But no, I have never seen him since I left him outside the Priory at noon last Tuesday morning—never!"

CHAPTER XXIX

WITHOUT EXPLANATION

BRIXEY was obviously so taken aback by this reply that his uncle, after looking him carefully over for a few seconds, turned to the landlord and the inspector with a significant glance.

"I think my nephew would like to have some explanation from me, or to give me some explanation of his own in private," he said. "I've no doubt you gentlemen, and all the town, will eventually get your fill of this before long! But just now——"

Brackett took the plain hint and moved to the door. But Inspector Crabbe looked like a man whose hopes are being dashed just as they are about to be realised.

"Those Lees, sir?" he asked. "You don't make any charge against them?"

"For the present, my friend," answered Linthwaite, "I make no charge against anybody. I'm too much in the dark."

"You said those Lees had slipped off in a motor-car, Mr. Brixey," said Crabbe. "Seemed to be running away, you thought?"

"Yes, but I don't know that they were carrying off anybody's property, Inspector," replied Brixey. "I, too, have no charge to make. Better wait. Morning may bring revelations!"

He spoke chaffingly, but when Crabbe and the landlord had left the room he turned to his uncle with a face that was serious enough.

"What on earth is all this about?" he asked. "You don't know what strange things I've unearthed since Thursday! I've an awful lot to tell you. There's some extraordinary mystery at the bottom of all this, and I'm certain it's just about to be developed in a very serious way for somebody."

"Haden't you better tell me your story of this past week! Then I'll tell you what I've been up to. And then——"

Linthwaite interrupted his nephew with a deep cough and a sly look.

"Yes, dear boy," he said, "and what then?"

"Then, I should say, it will probably be high time to call in the police," replied Brixey.

"It might be," remarked Linthwaite, "if I knew, or we knew, what to call them in about. But it seems to me that somebody else will have to do the calling, and I don't know who that somebody else really is. I don't know what's going on!"

"You want to know what's happened to me. I can tell you in a very few words. Last Tuesday morning, when I went out of this hotel, bent on no more than a mere stroll to a neighbouring ruin, I met a woman whom I knew years ago as a Mrs. Cradock Melsome."

"I know—know, mind!—her husband to be living. I know where he is, or was a week ago. But I found out that she had married, twenty-two years since, a well-to-do man in this town, and was now his widow—supposed widow, that is, for she has, of course, no legal status, unfortunately for her. She is now called Mrs. Byfield."

"I spoke to her for a few minutes, but without telling her that I knew her real husband to be alive. I might have done so, but our conversation was interrupted by her brother-in-law, Charles Melsome, whom I know well enough, though I haven't seen him for two years."

"I walked away with him, leaving her. I asked him a question or two about matters. 'Does Mrs. Byfield know that Cradock is alive?' was one. 'Has she any family?' was another."

"He told me that she had one son, that she didn't know that Cradock was alive, and that she had married Byfield in good faith. I then asked him a most pertinent question—'How did Byfield leave his money?' He replied that Byfield had died intestate, and that she, as his supposed widow, had administered the estate."

"'In that case,' I said, 'the unfortunate woman is going to encounter serious trouble, for your brother is here in England, seeking her for reasons of his own, and he is sure to find her. The truth will come out, and she and her son won't be entitled to a penny of Byfield's.'"

"He then asked me what should be done. I said I would consider matters during my walk, and speak to him again in the afternoon. We had an appointment for half-past two at the Priory, and parted. And now," added Linthwaite, "I may tell you that for thirty years I have been trustee for these two Melsomes, and——"

"A moment!" interrupted Brixey. "I'd better tell you that I

know all about it, though you think I don't. The fact is, I was so convinced that you'd been the victim of foul play that I sent Gaffkin to search your papers—and, to cut the story short, I've got the Melsome receipts and the pedigree safely locked up here. Sorry to have had to make such a search—but, you know, everybody here believed you'd been murdered!"

"Oh, well, then, of course, you know who these Melses are," said Linthwaite, somewhat surprised by his nephew's drastic methods. "Um—I hope Gaffkin was careful in looking through my papers?"

"You can be sure he was," replied Brixey. "Yes, I worked out all about the Melses, and I also came to the conclusion that Mrs. Martin Byfield is really Mrs. Cradock Melsome."

"And as it's well known in the town that Martin Byfield died intestate, Gaffkin and I, of course, realised that, as you said just now, Mrs. Byfield and her son aren't entitled to a penny, by the mere fact that her marriage to Martin was no marriage. So now you see that you and I are at a common point. I know what you know, so far."

"Aye, but you don't know this!" said Linthwaite. "Cradock Melsome is in London, wanting to find his wife. He has a reason. Needless to say, it's for his own benefit. But, on thinking the whole thing thoroughly over, when I got to Mardene village after leaving Charles Melsome, I wired to Cradock bidding him meet me here at the 'Mitre' next day."

"The fact was, I saw a way out of the difficulty for his wife, and I knew that I could save her annoyance. It was better that he should know where she was than that he should begin to advertise and make inquiries, and so I told him to come here last Wednesday."

Brixey jumped in his chair.

"Have you seen this Cradock Melsome lately?" he asked. "If so, what is he like?"

"I saw him a fortnight ago," answered Linthwaite. "Just after he came over from Canada. Elderly, greyish-haired, fresh-coloured man—good-looking."

"Then he did come to Selchester, and I believe he saw Mrs. Byfield, too, last week!" exclaimed Brixey. "That explains a lot. He was here on two different nights."

"Aye? Well, I didn't see him," said Linthwaite, with a sarcastic laugh. "I was otherwise engaged. I returned from Mardene, after a bit of lunch at the village inn, and was at the Priory a little after two."

"I looked in at the museum while I was waiting for Charles Melsome. A youngish man, an intelligent fellow, evidently a townsman, was in there—marked, I may tell you, by a peculiar cast in one eye—and I got into conversation with him."

"He asked me if I would care to examine the interior of the old tower, and as Melsome hadn't come, I went up the stairs with him. He took me from one story to another—finally into an inner room at the top, a furnished room."

"I saw it to-night," remarked Brixey.

"Then you saw my prison!" said Linthwaite. "Before I'd scarcely crossed the threshold, the key was turned on me, and there I was, trapped! Of course, I immediately realised that my two meetings of that morning had something to do with this—but what?"

"I couldn't think that Mrs. Byfield would endeavour to trap me. As for Charles Melsome, he had to look to me for a hundred and fifty pounds a year. But there I was, evidently imprisoned for a purpose. I looked round and saw that all preparations had been made for me—bed, easy chair, tables, and so on. It was very evident that all had been lately arranged.

"And there I stayed, wondering and indescribably angry, until about six o'clock, when the door opened, and the man whom we will call Squint—for I never learnt his name—entered. Incidentally, I may mention that when he did enter, he let me see that he had an ugly-looking revolver handy. He stood just within, close to the door, one hand on the latch, the other in a pocket from which the revolver also protruded.

"'I'm sorry, Mr. Linthwaite,' he said, 'but you made a great mistake in coming to Selchester just now, and you'll have to pay for it. You'll have to remain here at least a week in this room.'

"'You infernal blackguard!' I said, 'if you don't stand aside and let me walk freely down those stairs you'll see the inside of a jail for longer than you think of.' 'I think not, sir,' he said, coolly enough. 'And talking of jails, this of yours shall be made as comfortable as possible for you.' Then he slightly opened the door and beckoned in a demure young woman.

"'This young lady,' he said, 'will take any orders you like to give her, and do anything in reason for you. But,' he added, with a sinister look, 'whenever she comes up, Mr. Linthwaite, there'll always be a man in close attendance.'

"'Look here!' and he opened the door a few inches again and showed me a black-visaged, determined-looking fellow outside. 'Make the most of the situation, Mr. Linthwaite,' he continued. 'Only a week and you'll be free again.'

"'Whose work is this, and what does it mean?' I demanded. 'That, sir,' he answered, 'is neither here nor there—so far as I'm concerned. Take my advice—and be as comfortable as you can!' After which, without as much as an if-you-please, he calmly took my hat and umbrella and walked off with them—three guineas' worth of property, which I've never seen since."

"Who the devil is this squint-eyed fellow?" growled Brixey.

"No more idea than the man in the moon!" said Linthwaite. "But he must be easily identified. However, there I was, and I had to make the best of it. So I cultivated the demure damsel. She was friendly and agreeable enough, so long as I said nothing about freedom—in fact, I am bound to say she made a very pleasant gaoler."

"She bought me some good wine—by the by, I have left three bottles of it there—and got me some books, and was very kind. And, knowing that I should be detained a week, I got her to take a telegram for you, which I suppose you duly received, eh?"

"I got a telegram from Newhaven, sent in your name by a squint-eyed man," remarked Brixey. "It informed me that you had gone to Paris for a week. That's what I got!"

Linthwaite pursed his lips and shook his head.

"Mr. Squint," he remarked, "is certainly a person of ingenuity and resourcefulness, whoever he is! But to tell the rest, I remained immured

until after dark this evening. Then Squint and the black-visaged person appeared, conducted me under stress to a punt at the edge of that lake, and took me over to the island, Squint kindly remarking as they rowed off that he would be obliged if I wouldn't shout for help for half an hour or so. And the rest you know."

"It seems to me," observed Brixey, "that the first thing to do is to find out who this squint-eyed chap is!"

"The first thing to do," said Linthwaite, "is to discover the whole circumstances and situation of the woman known here as Mrs. Byfield. I don't know why I was kidnapped and locked up, but I am sure that it had something to do with the Byfield estate.

"Now, look here! You've evidently been going into the matter. Do you know when Mrs. Byfield's son comes of age?"

"Yes!" replied Brixey, with a significant nod. "He comes of age to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXX

THE MIDNIGHT DISCOVERY

THE old man of law's eyebrows went up and a sharp look of suspicion flashed across his face.

"To-morrow!" he exclaimed. "And all this going on! Then we must see these Byfields at once."

"Can't be done," said Brixey. "Mrs. Byfield and her son went off to London hurriedly first thing this morning. Why, I don't know. I wish I did, for more reasons than one."

"More mystery?" asked Linthwaite.

"It's all mystery," assented Brixey. "Look here! Hadn't I better tell you everything that's happened to me since last Thursday afternoon? You'll get the hang of things then. And it strikes me the time's getting short."

Linthwaite, who had sat slowly sipping his whisky and water, set his glass down, drew out a cigar case and lighted a cigar.

"Go on!" he said. "Everything, then."

He listened in silence while his nephew related all his doings from the arrival of Georgina at the *Sentinel* office to his adventures of that evening, only asking a brief question here and there. And in the end he nodded his head with decision.

"You're quite right in your conclusion, my lad!" he said. "There's a conspiracy here, which was evidently in being before I came to Selchester last week, and which was to have matured to-morrow. My presence interfered with its prospects of success; your doings have further interfered; the sudden going away of Mrs. Byfield has presumably been another cog in the wheel.

"But why did she go? Why did she persuade that girl to go with her? What did she tell that girl last night, to induce her to go? And, by George, sir, there's no doubt that girl is the real owner of all the Martin Byfield property—every pennyworth!"

"What do you think now you know all?" asked Brixey.

"That that scoundrel Charles Melsome—or Christopher Mesham, as he now calls himself—is at the bottom of it!" answered Linthwaite.

"The squint-eyed fellow is probably his tool, or agent. Probably, too, Charles encountered Cradock when he came here in answer to my wire, and has drawn him into it. Presumably the object was to black-mail Mrs. Byfield to a very considerable extent, and to make the lad Fanshawe another victim. Between them, mother and son will to-morrow, when the son comes of age, be in possession of a considerable amount.

"These fellows meant, no doubt, to have a big share of it on condition of keeping silence about Mrs. Byfield's marriage to Cradock before her marriage to Byfield. We don't know what they may have already done. There's only one bit of consolation that I see."

"What?" asked Brixey.

"You say that Mesham, as we'll call him, looked much taken aback when he saw those three going off this morning?" said Mr. Linthwaite.

"Clean sold!" replied Brixey. "So much so that he stood with his mouth wide open, staring!"

"That looks as if he saw his victim escaping him," remarked Linthwaite. "But we mustn't trust to chance. Now, first, do you know where these three are in London?"

"No," said Brixey, "but Brackett may know. Miss Byfield, I believe, promised to wire to him. The old chap was anxious about her."

"Go and see," commanded Linthwaite. "And then send for my overcoat and hat from my bedroom. We've got to go out."

Brixey came back in five minutes, bringing the hat and coat and the desired information. Georgina had wired to Brackett that evening. They were all staying at the Grosvenor Hotel.

"Very good," observed Linthwaite. "Then come on to Semmerby's house."

Brixey looked at his watch.

"The old man will be in bed," he said. "It's eleven now."

"Doesn't matter if it's two in the morning, my lad!" answered Linthwaite. "Or three, or four. We're going to have him up!"

Brixey spoke a word or two to the old landlord as they passed out, asking him to keep up a bit of fire in the sitting-room; he already foresaw that there might be no going to bed that night. Then he took his uncle along to Semmerby's house—to find it, as he had expected, all in darkness.

It was not until they had knocked and rung several times that a window was opened just above the door and a grey head was put out.

"It's I—Brixey—Mr. Semmerby," said the young disturber. "And here's my uncle with me!"

"God bless me!" exclaimed the old lawyer. "Glad to hear you're found, Mr. Linthwaite! You want me? I'll be down in two minutes."

He presently appeared at the door in his dressing-gown, carrying a lamp, which he lifted towards Linthwaite's face.

"Safe and sound, I see, at any rate!" he said cordially. "Come in! And where," he went on, when he had led them into the room in which Brixey had found him and Fanshawe Byfield the night before, "where did you find your uncle, young man?"

"He's been pretty active in looking for you, and pretty original in

some of his methods," he added, turning to Linthwaite. "I thought he'd come off all right in the end."

Linthwaite laid his hand on his fellow-practitioner's arm.

"My friend!" he said. "Never mind where I sprang from just now! There's mischief afoot—black, bad mischief! Now, first, do you know why Mrs. Byfield and her son have gone to London?"

Semmerby showed his astonishment.

"Haven't the ghost of a notion!" he answered. "I knew nothing about their going until your nephew told me of it this morning."

"Very well," said Linthwaite. "Another question. You know Selchester, I suppose, as well as anybody in it. Do you know a man, apparently about thirty to thirty-five years of age, dark, medium-sized, commonplace in appearance, but marked by a decided cast in his left eye?"

Semmerby started back, and a suspicious gleam shot over his face.

"You're describing my head clerk—John Letwige!" he exclaimed.

"Your clerk!" said Linthwaite. He turned to Brixey and spread out his hands. "I might have guessed that!" he muttered. "Of course—he'd have facilities!"

Semmerby stared from one visitor to another.

"What is all this?" he asked sharply. "What has my clerk—who's been with me a good many years, a thoroughly trustworthy fellow—to do with this?"

Linthwaite pointed to a chair and laid hold of another himself.

"Sit down!" he said. "Late as it is, you've got to listen. And then—then I think we've all got to act!"

Brixey, sitting on the edge of the table and watching intently as Linthwaite set forth his carefully marshalled facts to his brother solicitor, was struck by the conflicting emotions depicted on old Semmerby's face.

Astonishment, doubt, suspicion, incredulity, anger—all these were plain, as they were manifested in succession. But eventually they all merged in one expression of utter amazement. Semmerby was clearly mystified.

"Do you mean to tell me," he exclaimed, as soon as Linthwaite had made an end, "do you really mean to tell me that Mrs. Byfield is, legally, not Mrs. Byfield at all, never legally was, and therefore was never in a position to administer that estate? Do you know that to be so?"

"I know it to be so," affirmed Linthwaite. "The woman you know as Mrs. Martin Byfield is Mrs. Cradock Melsome—more's the pity she is! But she is!"

"What does this precious husband of hers want with her?" asked Semmerby.

"The fact of the matter is," replied Linthwaite, "a certain relation of our family has left money to her. I'm trustee for it. I haven't been able to trace her, and I was fool enough, having failed to do so, to acquaint Cradock with the fact, thinking that he might have heard of her—because, failing her, it goes to him. The result was that he crossed to England recently. Wherever there's money to be got, these two will be after it."

"You think he's the man who was seen in company with Mesham here last week?" asked Semmerby.

"Without a doubt!" agreed Linthwaite. "And he's no doubt

entered into this conspiracy with his brother. Semmerby, this has got to be seen to at once !”

The old lawyer shook his head.

“A pretty coil !” he said. “I—I don’t know which way to look at it. And my clerk, too—evidently in it ! A man I trusted most implicitly. Why, he’s practically managed my practice for some years. I’ve entrusted him with——”

He suddenly broke off his remarks, as if a new idea had occurred to him, and Brixey noticed that when he rose he was trembling a little.

“I—I think,” he said, glancing from one to the other, “I think that, late as it is, I shall have to go to my office. I shall never sleep if I don’t. Perhaps you’ll come with me. I’ll get ready.”

The Selchester clocks were striking midnight as the three men entered Semmerby’s office and went upstairs to his private room. The old lawyer showed an almost painful nervousness as he turned on the light and went to a shelf on which were a number of boxes, each inscribed with the name of some client. He pointed to one marked “Byfield,” and Brixey lifted it down and set it on the desk.

“There are securities in here,” whispered Semmerby as he produced a key. “And the worst of it is, considering what we know now, they are easily negotiable securities. This is not a difficult lock, and if that man Letwige is really dishonest——”

He paused as, throwing back the lid, he revealed a quantity of documents and papers, neatly parcelled and docketed. And when he spoke again it was in accents of consternation.

“Gone !” he said. “Certain securities—some East India bonds—other things ! My God, Linthwaite ! But I fear, I fear this may not be the worst. I must go to the bank, to the manager—he lives over it. Come with me !”

Brixey put the box on its shelf again, and Linthwaite gave the old man his arm down the stairs and along the street. All three were very silent until the bank manager had been roused and had admitted them by his private door.

By that time Semmerby was pale and shaking, and he looked to have aged ten years since the uncle and nephew had walked into his parlour an hour earlier.

“Hollinshaw !” he said, grasping the manager by the lapels of his dressing-gown. “Tell me ! Have you the Byfield box of securities and papers safe ? Tell me ? A word will do !”

The manager started back and gazed from one anxious face to the other.

“The Byfield box !” he exclaimed. “Good heavens, Mr. Semmerby—you sent your clerk, Letwige, for it just before the bank closed this afternoon. He carried it away with him !”

CHAPTER XXXI

THE ABSCONDER

THE old lawyer relinquished his hold on the bank manager’s coat and stepped back. His hands fell nervelessly to his sides ; his lips, quivering and pale, parted in a queer, almost ghastly grin.

"What!" he exclaimed, in a tone that nearly approached a snarl. "My clerk, Letwige, fetched that box this afternoon?"

"To be exact, yesterday afternoon," replied the manager, glancing at a clock which hung on the wall of the bank parlour. "It's past midnight, you see, Mr. Semmerby. At ten minutes to four yesterday afternoon."

"By whose order?" demanded Semmerby. "You couldn't give up that box without authority!"

The bank manager turned away in silence, and, unlocking a drawer in his desk, turned over some documents.

"There you are, Mr. Semmerby," he said, handing the old man a sheet of letter paper. "All correct, I believe, so far as we're concerned."

Semmerby's hands shook so much that he was obliged to lay the paper on the edge of the desk before he could read it. Linthwaite and Brixey, without ceremony, bent over it on either side of him.

"Nothing could be plainer," remarked the bank manager. "That's Mrs. Byfield's private note-paper, and Mrs. Byfield's signature. I ought to know that, anyway!"

Brixey found himself regarding an octavo sheet of slightly tinted notepaper whereon an address was embossed in thick black letters. All but the signature of what he saw on it was type-written. The signature was in a somewhat conventional feminine style, of the old-fashioned Italian type of penmanship so popular among English women in the Victorian era.

*The Minories, Selchester,
May 19th, 1919.*

Dear Mr. Semmerby,

Will you please ask Mr. Hollinshaw to hand over to you the box of securities and deeds this afternoon, so as to have everything in readiness for me first thing to-morrow morning?

*Yours truly,
Harriet Byfield.*

"That's what your man brought, Mr. Semmerby," continued Hollinshaw. "Of course, as he brought it direct from you, I took it as sufficient authorisation, and handed over the box."

The old lawyer brought his fist heavily down on the letter.

"I never saw this thing till now!" he exclaimed. "Never! I believe it's a forgery!"

The bank manager started, picked up the letter, and looked sharply at it. He put it down again with a decisive shake of his head.

"No, sir!" he said quietly. "Not Mrs. Byfield's signature, anyway. I've not been familiar with that for several years for nothing!"

Linthwaite, who, as soon as Semmerby spoke of forgery, had nudged Brixey's elbow, picked up the letter.

"A question or two," he said. "Does Mrs. Byfield commonly use a typewriter?"

"She's used one for two or three years, to my knowledge," said Hollinshaw.

"This signature of hers is a fairly easy one to imitate," remarked Linthwaite. "A very clever forger——"

"I say that's no forgery!" exclaimed Hollinshaw. "I've seen Mrs. Byfield's signature on hundreds of cheques. I know it as well as I know my own!"

Linthwaite said no more. He turned and looked at Semmerby, who was groaning and muttering.

"I suppose there was a good deal that was valuable in the box?" he asked.

"Valuable!" said Semmerby bitterly. "There's pretty nearly the whole of the Byfield estate in it. And the worst of it is, it's mostly in negotiable securities! If that scoundrel, Letwige, has those, and what's missing from my office——"

Hollinshaw turned sharply from the drawer to which he was restoring the letter.

"Ah, he's got something from your office, has he?" he exclaimed. "Then that explains what puzzled me! That letter came into his hands, and he has made use of it without your knowledge. But what's he got?"

"A quantity of East India bonds, for one thing," answered Semmerby. "And other matters just as easily negotiable. As I was saying, Letwige, with his knowledge of London, where he was a clerk in the City before coming to me, will be able to convert a lot of these securities into cash, easily, in an hour or two.

"And some of the others he could do the same thing with, on sight, in Paris, or Vienna, or New York. They're most of them as good as an open cheque!"

"Then," remarked Hollinshaw drily, "the best thing to do, Mr. Semmerby, is to lay Letwige by the heels! But I imagine he's off."

Brixey, who had refrained from telling Linthwaite of the address in the green purse and was by this time determined on keeping it to himself, stepped into the arena.

"I have very good reason for knowing that Letwige went away from Selchester in a motor-car, travelling west, in company with Nat Lee and his daughter, this evening," he said. "And I suggest that we now go and ask Mr. Crabbe to track him and his companions. They can possibly find out something about the car."

"We'll have to do more than that," muttered Semmerby. "I must get up to London—at once! Who knows Mrs. Byfield's address there?"

"I do!" said Brixey. "She's at the Grosvenor Hotel."

Hollinshaw picked up a railway guide.

"Get a train from Ledfield Junction just after four o'clock," he said.

"Land you at London Bridge ten minutes past six."

"I shall take it!" exclaimed Semmerby. "I must see Mrs. Byfield at once."

"I'll go with you," said Linthwaite. "I, too, want to see Mrs. Byfield—and some other people, who, I rather suspect, will be somewhere near her."

Brixey walked with his elderly companions as far as the hotel, and then, under pretence of going on to the police station, walked farther up the street. But he had no intention of knocking up Inspector Crabbe.

While in the bank he had been thinking hard. It was very clear to him that Letwige had been, if not the chief at any rate one of the chief partners in the conspiracy which had been interfered with by Linthwaite's appearance in Selchester. Clear, too, that something else—perhaps his own doings—having interfered at the last moment, Letwige had effected a bold and daring stroke by helping himself to the wealth which he would probably have shared in more comfortable and less risky fashion had things gone well with him and his partners.

But had he made that stroke on his own behalf, solely? Or was it in collusion with somebody else. Mesham, for instance? As for the Lees, father and daughter, Brixey regarded them as no more than agents—servants—tools—who were probably being well paid and bundled into obscurity.

Nevertheless, they might be useful, and Brixey, as he thoughtfully paced the deserted streets, once more repeated to himself the address which he had seen in the green purse—Wolmark's Private Hotel, Trinity Square, E.C.

He went back to the "Mitre" at last, without having been near the police station. But during the hour in which he paced the streets of the old town, meeting no one but a very occasional and much surprised policeman, Brixey had formulated a plan of action. It was like most of his schemes, a plan which depended on luck.

But he believed in his luck. There was a chance, a sporting chance, a toss-up chance, that he could possibly circumvent Letwige, or Letwige and his gang, at the eleventh hour. And he was going to take it without saying a word to anyone.

Brackett, ardently solicitous that Mr. Linthwaite and Mr. Semmerby should not suffer by these unwonted adventures, had roused up his cook and caused a refectory to be ready at three o'clock, which, he said, he scarcely knew whether to call very early breakfast or very late supper.

Whichever it was, it sent Semmerby off in better spirits, and his feelings of despondency had changed to sentiments of lively anger by the time all three were in the corners of a first-class carriage and bound for London.

"If I can lay hands on my clerk," he said, "I'll—I'll—but you shall see!"

"By the by," remarked Brixey. "Do you happen to remember where your clerk was last Thursday afternoon?"

Semmerby reflected for a while.

"Yes, I do!" he answered suddenly. "I sent him over to New-haven, on business—about the sale of some property, near the harbour. And I wish he'd fallen in the harbour, and broken his neck, and been drowned! I do, indeed, though I am a churchwarden!"

Brixey smiled. Things were smoothing themselves out. Now he knew beyond doubt that Letwige had sent the altered telegram. But was it his own idea, or had it been at the instigation of some cleverer man?

CHAPTER XXXII

BLUE SPECTACLES

It was half-past six, and a fine and cheery May morning, when Brixey, having seen his two elderly companions safely off in a cab, bound first for Linthwaite's chambers in the Temple and thence to seek Mrs. Byfield and her party at their hotel, turned into a public telephone box at London Bridge Station and rang up New Scotland Yard.

The time had come, he had decided in the train, for calling in expert police assistance. He now knew enough to warrant him in taking action when he got to Trinity Square, if the people were there whom he firmly believed would be there. The folk at New Scotland Yard knew him, Brixey, well enough—he had been mixed up with them more than once.

As good luck would have it, the man who answered his telephone call was particularly well known to him, and was instantly eager to know what was afoot at that early hour of the morning.

"Tell you that when you meet me," said Brixey. "Come yourself, with the next best man you can get, and meet me as quickly as possible outside Mark Lane Station—going there straight, just now. Bye-bye. A nice job for you—and for me."

The voice at the other end of the wire said that its owner would be at the appointed rendezvous in half an hour, and Brixey rang off, left the station, and strolled lazily across London Bridge, looking about him with keen enjoyment of the rousing life of road and river, and feeling that if one has been out of London even for a few days there is a vast amount of enjoyment to be had in getting back to it.

He sauntered along, past the Monument, took a short cut into Great Tower Street, and was lounging outside Mark Lane Station when, at five minutes past seven, two men drove up in a taxicab, dismounted, and approached him. Quiet, soberly attired, eminently respectable persons these, who might have been taken for solid City men come very early to business, and Brixey looked them over with approving eyes.

"Good!" he said. "I think I've a nice little job for you. The actual doing of it is more in your particular line than mine."

"What's the game?" demanded the man whom Brixey had rung up. "Your last affair was murder! Same again?"

"Not this time, so far," replied Brixey. "Not but what there may be danger in it. Come into this corner."

He took the two detectives aside and rapidly put them in possession of the pertinent facts. Letwige had absconded with certain valuable negotiable securities, and there was little doubt that he had made off in the company of Lee and his daughter.

In Debbie Lee's purse Brixey had seen a certain address. Therefore, he concluded, there was at any rate a sporting chance of finding the missing birds at that address.

"And now why do you think they'd make for this place, Mr. Brixey?" asked one of the men. "You've some idea in your mind?"

Brixey pointed towards the dock district.

"It's an easy job to slip away from here to the Continent," he said. "Plenty of boats running to Antwerp, Rotterdam, Hamburg, and so on. This would be a convenient spot for the woman and her father to lie snug in for a few hours while Letwige deals with the securities, or some of 'em, in the City."

"Then the thing to do," said the first man, "is to take a look at this private hotel. But these people know you by sight."

"Nothing venture, nothing have!" replied Brixey. "The probability is that they won't be stirring yet. Letwige, I understand, is an old Londoner, and he'll know that there's no business to be done before ten o'clock. Come round the corner and let's take an observation of the exterior of this spot."

From the corner of Byward Street the three men looked out on Trinity Square, and one of the detectives at once pointed to a house at the north side, where a faded, gilt-lettered sign proclaimed the presence of Wolmark's Private Hotel, evidently a sort of second-rate establishment, judging from its dingy blinds and general appearance. A man was polishing the brass bell-pull at its front door; a girl was washing the steps.

"There's the cage!" said the first detective. "Now, then, how about finding if the birds are in it?"

"There'll be a register," remarked the other man.

"Aye, but it's a hundred to one if they've given their real names," declared the first. "That's not at all likely. How would it be now——"

"Stop a bit!" said Brixey. "Here's a new development, I think."

He had suddenly caught sight, across the road, lounging by the railings of the square, of a figure which somehow seemed strangely familiar—that of a man in a semi-nautical suit of blue serge cut in yachtsman fashion, topped by a peaked yachting cap.

Its wearer came across, at the same time pointing a warning finger towards the street which Brixey and the detectives had just quitted.

"Gaffkins, by all that's wonderful!" exclaimed Brixey, and drew his companions back into shelter. "This is the chap I told you of, just now. He's evidently come up from Brighton. If he's on the same job, then, indeed, we are going to know something!"

"I shouldn't have known you, Gaffkin," he went on, as the private inquiry agent came up, looking very mysterious. "Sacrificed moustache and whiskers, eh? Well, what's brought you here?"

Gaffkin, motioning all three to retire a little farther along Byward Street, jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the hotel.

"Mesham!" he said. "He's in there—Wolmark's. I followed him here last night. I've a man in there, keeping an eye on him—a safe man. I'm expecting him out every minute, with a report."

"What have you been doing?" asked Brixey. He introduced the two detectives by name, and the professional eyes took stock of their amateur rival. "We're all on the same job, Gaffkin," he continued. "Tell your tale!"

"I heard that Mesham had gone from Selchester to Brighton by the 9.41, yesterday," said Gaffkin. "I followed by the 12.13. I've friends at Brighton, living near the station. I went to their house at once, shaved whiskers and moustache off, and borrowed this wig.

"Then I set out to look for my gentleman. I know Brighton pretty well, and I'd an idea I'd run across him before long. I looked in at one or two spots, and eventually found him at the 'Bodega.' He'd another elderly man with him, very like himself."

"Craddock!" exclaimed Brixey.

"No doubt," agreed Gaffkin. "They were in very close conversation. Now, I wanted to test my disguise, so I took a seat nearby while I had a glass of sherry. I saw Mesham glance at me once or twice, and I knew he didn't know me from Adam."

"Well, I kept 'em in view, quietly. They went off to Booth's in East Street, to lunch, and when they'd got in there I got the help of a friend who's had a bit of experience in these matters, and between us we kept an eye on them all the afternoon. When they left Booth's they walked to the Margrave Hotel and went in, and there they stopped until evening."

"Then they went to the station. Mesham booked for London Bridge. The other man stayed in Brighton. We followed Mesham. I took good care he never saw me again after the 'Bodega' meeting, though I knew very well he hadn't recognised me there."

"When we got to London Bridge we followed him here, to Wolmark's Private Hotel. It was then half-past ten. As I was quite certain he'd never seen this friend of mine, I sent him in after him."

"He came out presently to tell me that Mesham had booked a room—No. 8—and that he'd booked No. 11, right opposite. I told him to keep a strict watch on Mesham all night—and he's a dependable fellow. I got a room at another hotel, just along here, and now I'm waiting for him. That's all."

"So," remarked the first detective, "there's two of 'em to look after, Mr. Brixey?"

"Four," said his companion. "There's the girl and her father."

"If they're here!" exclaimed the other. "We don't know that yet!"

"We don't know that Letwige is here, either," said Brixey. "We don't know——"

"Here's my friend!" interrupted Gaffkin.

A man came round the corner—a man whom Brixey, had he been writing newspaper English, would have called a person of an eminently watchful and noticing disposition, evidenced, in this instance, by the fact that when he saw Gaffkin in conversation with strangers, he immediately affected absolute non-knowledge of him, and made as if to cross the street. Gaffkin laughed with satisfaction.

"Didn't I tell you he was a dependable fellow?" he remarked. "All right, Matsey—all friends here. Come on!"

Matsey turned slowly, and coming up to the group, took the three strangers in at one glance and Gaffkin with another.

"Well?" asked Gaffkin.

"He's there all right, Mr. G.," replied the auxiliary. "I saw him take in his hot water not ten minutes since. But, of course, I knew he was there before that. I've kept strict watch."

Brixey turned on Gaffkin's aide-de-camp with a sudden inspiration.

"Did you see anything of any people who, if they came in at all, would come in very late?" he demanded. "Two men, one woman?"

Matsey shook his head.

"No," he answered. "But there was one man, one woman—together—came in about one o'clock this morning. Only saw their backs as they went past my door. I had it a trifle open."

"One man, one woman—together?" said Brixey. "Then——"

Before he could say one word more Gaffkin suddenly pushed him inside the mouth of a passage by which they were standing, and, as if by instinct, the other three men separated and scattered over the street.

"Mesham—and another man!" whispered Gaffkin. "Keep back; he'd know you!"

A moment later Mesham, turning to neither right nor left, walked past, in company with a man in a dark overcoat and top-hat, who wore large blue spectacles.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE SUGGESTED SECRET

THE two elderly solicitors, refreshed by some attention to the toilet at Linthwaite's chambers and by a cup of coffee hastily prepared by his bedmaker, who, having diligently read the *Sentinel* for the last few days, was unfeignedly surprised to see him alive and well, drove up to the Grosvenor Hotel at eight o'clock and, presenting themselves at the office, asked for Mrs. Byfield. And they were at once plunged into further mystery.

"Mrs. Byfield is not here," replied the clerk. "She was here yesterday for a few hours, but she left again early in the afternoon. Mr. Fanshawe Byfield is here, and Miss Byfield."

"Better see Fanshawe at once," muttered Semmerby. "Will you send up to Mr. Fanshawe Byfield's room?" he added, turning to the clerk. "Tell him—however, here's my card."

"Now, what's the meaning of this?" he went on as he and Linthwaite turned away to wait. "What's this woman mean by rushing up to town with these two, leaving them here, and going off again? Where's she gone? And what's it all about?"

"She'll have reasons, of course," replied Linthwaite. "I only hope she hasn't gone to meet those infernal Melsomes. There's no doubt that Charles has been blackmailing her for the last two years, and if he and his precious brother get hold of her, why, I don't know what they mayn't persuade her to do!"

"You know what the poor woman's position is! Naturally, she doesn't want all Selchester—a little, provincial-minded place—to know her secret, and those two are capable of anything. I wish I'd never had dealings with them. They'll probably say to her: 'Make it worth our while, or out comes the whole truth!'"

"My opinion, Semmerby, is that your clerk's been in league with Charles Melsome, whom you know better as Mesham, and that Charles is now in the happy possession of these securities. Then, of course, he'll make Mrs. Byfield pay for silence, and the Byfield fortune will go where it was never meant to go."

"Not if I know anything!" growled Semmerby. He glanced round

and saw the man who had taken his card beckoning him to the lift. "Come along!" he continued. "We'd better be careful what we say to this lad, Linthwaite," he added, as they were carried upward. "My own impression, from what your nephew told me, is that Fanshawe Byfield is in the dark as yet."

"I shall leave the saying to you," replied Linthwaite. "I'm a stranger. He doesn't know me."

Fanshawe, encountered in the act of brushing his hair, stared hard at the family solicitor's companion.

"Hallo, Mr. Semmerby!" he exclaimed. "What brings you here? Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"This gentleman is Mr. Linthwaite, who was lost," said Semmerby brusquely. "He's come to light again."

Fanshawe laid down his brushes and grasped Linthwaite's hand.

"Very glad to hear that, sir!" he exclaimed heartily. "There's been a nice old row about you. But what does it all mean?"

"You'll hear plenty about it in time," growled Semmerby. He carefully closed the door and sat down on the edge of Fanshawe's bed. "Where's your mother?" he demanded. "They say downstairs that she was here yesterday and went off again. Where's she gone?"

Fanshawe, who was sprinkling bay rum over his fair hair, set the bottle down with a bang.

"I don't know where my mother is!" he answered. "I've no more idea than you have, perhaps less. She and my cousin Georgina worked up some dodge or other on Sunday night. I wasn't to ask questions, and I haven't asked questions."

"We all came here yesterday morning. My mother was out, somewhere, for an hour. Then she came back and had lunch. Then she went off again, saying she wouldn't be back till to-day, and we were to—well, just to stop here till she returned."

"You know what my mother's like about business matters, Mr. Semmerby—she'll tell nobody anything until she wants to. So I didn't press her for any explanations. Georgie and I went to the theatre last night. We'd a good time, anyhow! And I guess my mother will turn up when she's done what she came up for."

"You haven't any idea what she came up for?" asked Semmerby.

"Not the remotest!" replied Fanshawe, carefully arranging his cravat. "I tell you, I was told to ask no questions. Georgina told me."

"Where's your cousin, then?" demanded Semmerby.

"In her room, I should think," said Fanshawe. "I arranged to meet her at breakfast at eight-thirty. You gentlemen had better join us."

"You seem mightily unconcerned, young man!" remarked Semmerby.

"I don't know of anything to be concerned about, now," retorted Fanshawe. "I was a good deal bothered about my mother up to Sunday night, but since Georgina took hold, I'm not. I reckon my mother's gone to do a bit of private business, and, as I say, she'll turn up."

"Oh!" said Semmerby. "Very well. And talking of business, you know that clerk of mine, Letwige?"

"Do I know my own face?" laughed Fanshawe. "Who doesn't know him—in our town, anyway?"

"Do you know if Letwige called to see your mother on business at all during the last few days?" asked Semmerby.

Fanshawe picked up his waistcoat and carefully removed a speck of dust.

"Letwige called to see me on business on Saturday afternoon," he answered. "Cricket Club business."

Semmerby glanced at Linthwaite before he asked any more questions. His glance suggested that he was now expecting important information.

"You didn't happen to let him use your mother's typewriter for a few minutes, did you?" he inquired.

Fanshawe turned sharply on the old lawyer.

"Yes, I did!" he answered. "Who told you I did?"

"Never mind," said Semmerby. "Why did he use it?"

"Nothing extraordinary," answered Fanshawe. "He just asked if he could type a letter. He wanted to put it in the pillar-box close by, on his way to the cricket ground. I went out then. I left him typing."

Semmerby looked once more at Linthwaite.

"There you are!" he said. "I knew that signature was forged, in spite of Hollinshaw! I see how the thing's been worked. But—forgery!"

"Forgery!" exclaimed Fanshawe. He was into his coat by that time, and he thrust his hands into its pockets and turned on Semmerby with a queer, nervous movement. "Forgery?"

"You'd far better tell him," remarked Linthwaite. "He'll have to know."

"Sit down!" said Semmerby, nodding at Fanshawe. "You wondered what we were doing here," he continued. "We made a very serious discovery during the night—at midnight."

"Yesterday afternoon, just before the bank closed, Letwige presented Hollinshaw with a letter, typed on your mother's note-paper and purporting to be signed by her, addressed to me, asking Hollinshaw to hand over the box containing the Byfield securities. Hollinshaw believed the letter to be genuine, and gave Letwige the box."

"Letwige has disappeared, and he not only has those securities from the bank—most of them easily negotiable—he also has some which he has stolen from my office. But answer me a question, to settle one point. You say you went out and left Letwige at your typewriter? Had he any chance of seeing your mother after you left him?"

"My mother was out," declared Fanshawe. "She was at Mrs. Merrifield's all Saturday afternoon. She never signed any such letter, that I'll swear! What's being done?" he asked anxiously. "Police know?"

"Crabbe's been put on the track," said Semmerby, who was all unaware that Brixey, for reasons of his own, had never been near Crabbe. "And Mr. Brixey is making some inquiry—I don't know what—here in town. Letwige left Selchester last night in company with Nat Lee and his daughter, by motor-car."

Fanshawe whistled.

"Whew!" he said. "Debbie Lee, eh! The devil! That explains something. Of late, I've often seen Letwige and Debbie Lee together in

the Priory grounds. I say, come down and meet my cousin—she'll have to know this."

Georgina, discovered in a quiet corner of the coffee-room, awaiting Fanshawe, became remarkably reserved after her first surprise on seeing Mr. Linthwaite.

She heard Semmerby's news without comment, and it was not until the four had nearly finished breakfast that she suddenly lifted a plate which lay beside her and revealed a telegram and a letter.

"Fanshawe!" she said, bending over to her cousin. "I have just had this wire from your mother. She will be here at ten o'clock. In the meantime there is something you are to do at once. Do you see this letter? It's addressed to the manager at the Imperial Safe Deposit in the city. There's the address.

"You're to give it to him and he'll show you a safe which your mother has there. Here's the key. In that safe you'll see a sealed envelope. You're to bring it here. Now go and get a cab, Fanshawe, and go to this place, and then get back here as soon as you can."

"Hanged if I know what all this mystery is about!" muttered Fanshawe, as he took the letter and the key. "What with the mater's mysterious movements, and now this Letwige affair——"

"Never mind, you'll know all about it presently," said Georgina. She turned to the two solicitors when Fanshawe had gone. "I may as well tell you something now," she continued. "Mrs. Byfield took me into her confidence on Sunday night and told me of something which has been giving her great trouble. That was the reason of her coming to London yesterday.

"I advised her to take a certain course and end her anxiety. When she comes back here you'll know all about it, Mr. Semmerby. She'll be surprised to find you here. We were to have gone back to Selchester by the eleven train."

Semmerby glanced at Georgina with unconcealed interest and curiosity.

"So there's a secret—and you know all its details, I suppose?" he said.

"Everything—since Sunday night," answered Georgina calmly.

Then, remarking that she would see them again at ten o'clock, she left the two men to themselves and disappeared. And Semmerby and Linthwaite waited and wondered until, as they lounged about in the hall of the hotel, they saw Mrs. Byfield enter, accompanied by an elderly clergyman.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE STROKE DIRECT

BEFORE Mesham and his companion had gone many yards along the street, Brixey and Gaffkin were peering round the corner of their retreat, and at the same moment the two detectives came sauntering back.

But Matsey, who had crossed the road in another direction and turned into a tobacconist's shop for a bare minute, went along on the opposite side, evidently bent on keeping an eye on the pair in front.

"He's after 'em!" whispered Gaffkin. "Now, who's the blue-spectacled man?"

"Letwige!" exclaimed Brixey. "Semmerby's clerk—from Selchester. But I'd forgotten that you don't know what happened last night. Listen," and he gave his companion a hasty but clear account of the discoveries at Semmerby's office and at the bank, to which the detectives, who had now come up, listened for the second time.

"That's Letwige, without a doubt," concluded Brixey. "He's changed into dark clothes, and put on a pair of blue glasses to hide his infernal squint, but that's he! And now then, you fellows, you've got to fall in with my plans! This is what I want you to do. You must——"

"Half a minute!" said Gaffkin. "Here's Matsey coming back."

Matsey came hurrying along the street and turned into the passage in which the others stood.

"They've gone into the office of the United Steamships Company, just along there," he said. "Both of 'em!"

"Ah!" remarked one of the detectives. "Going to inquire about passages to—where?"

"Listen to me!" continued Brixey. He button-holed the senior detective. "You know enough now," he said, "to arrest these fellows. Take 'em in charge, and bundle 'em off to the nearest police station. That's close by, isn't it? All right, I know it."

"Very well. Go and get 'em. Never mind what they say, or protest. In any case, you can make them accompany you to give an account of themselves. Gaffkin, you and Matsey go with them."

"And what about you, Mr. Brixey?" asked the elder detective. "What are you going to do?"

"Follow up a little idea of my own," answered Brixey. "And, on second thoughts, I'll keep Matsey. You can manage without him?"

"We'll take these fellows to the station round there and make them account for their doings," replied the detective. "You'll come there and identify Letwige and tell what you know?"

"I'll come there before very long and identify Letwige and Mesham, and tell all I know!" assented Brixey. "You go and make sure of them."

He beckoned Matsey to follow him and walked back in the direction of Trinity Square. At the corner he paused.

"Matsey!" he said. "You're a smart chap, I'm sure. I've got a bit of a notion that may turn out a master-stroke. It's got to be carried out in yonder hotel where you stopped last night, and at once. Now, will you do just what I ask?"

"Anything you like, sir," answered Gaffkin's assistant. "I reckon you know what you're up to, Mr. Brixey."

"I know what I'm up to," said Brixey confidently. "Now, look here. Just you leave me and stroll in front till you see a policeman. Get him to come with you to the front of Wolmark's Hotel, and get him also to hang about there with you. Whereabouts is the coffee-room?"

"First room on the right when you get in," replied Matsey. "Ground floor."

"Windows looking out on the street?" asked Brixey.

"All of them," said Matsey.

"Keep him strolling in front of those windows—you with him," commanded Brixey. "Tell him there'll be half a sovereign for him when I come out. Don't tell him too much, but tell him enough to interest him. Now be sly!"

Matsey moved away up the square, and Brixey followed at twenty yards' distance. But when they came to the hotel Matsey walked on-wards, while Brixey turned in at the open door.

He was all alive now for what he thought might turn out a successful venture. He had his own ideas as to why Letwige had gone at that early hour to the shipping office; he also had ideas as to what Letwige had probably left behind him at the hotel. And what he wanted to do he conceived that he could best do unaided.

The first thing was to see the register. There it lay, on a sloping desk, by the half window of a little office, just then empty. Brixey stepped straight to it, and had run his eye over the last half-dozen entries before anyone noticed his presence.

The first few entries conveyed nothing to him—the last two did:

Mr. C. Marrows Brighton.

Mr. and Mrs. Leeson Portsmouth.

Odd, thought Brixey, how people who adopt assumed names on these occasions will stick to the initials of their rightful ones! But without comment he turned to a sleepy-looking damsel who had appeared at the office window and was gazing speculatively at him.

"Friends of mine here, I think," said Brixey unconcernedly. "Mr. and Mrs. Leeson. Do you know if they're down yet?"

"Mr. Leeson's just gone out for a few minutes," replied the girl. "He ordered breakfast to be ready for them in half an hour when he went out. Mrs. Leeson's in the coffee-room now—waiting for him."

"Oh, thank you; then I'll go in to her!" said Brixey.

The girl pointed the stub of a pencil towards the coffee-room door, and Brixey walked in.

And as he entered, his quick eyes saw two things at the same time—Matsey and a big policeman, obviously much interested, marching slowly past the windows, and, at a table in a corner, turning over the pages of an illustrated paper, Debbie Lee.

She was the only occupant of the room—a smallish, dingy apartment, smelling strongly of the ghosts of chops and steaks—and she did not look up until Brixey had advanced to the table at which she sat. And before she looked up at all, he had noticed another thing.

At her right hand, set where her cup and saucer should have been, was a small, stout leather despatch-case with the initials "J.L." stamped on it in black. His heart gave a jump at that. What he wanted was, he felt sure, lying in that case, which Debbie was guarding whilst its owner took the air outside with Mesham and did a little necessary business.

Brixey had his hand on a chair, and was actually drawing it up to her table before Debbie knew he was there. At the grating sound she looked up and recognised him, and his heart jumped again as she instinctively clapped a hand—whereon he noticed a brand-new wedding ring—on the despatch case.

"That's right, Mrs.—Letwige!" whispered Brixey. "Take care of it for a few minutes longer!"

He knew from his slight acquaintance with her that this was a young woman of character and determination, who would probably show fight. But his sudden appearance had been too much for her, and she sank back in her chair, pale enough, and already trembling. Brixey drew his chair close in, and leaned across the table.

"Take it quietly!" he said, dropping his voice to a whisper. "Look out there—through the window at your left hand. You see two men waiting outside. One, as you see, is a policeman; the other is a detective. And I don't want to have to call them in."

The woman found her tongue. Brixey knew her to possess a naturally pleasant and ingratiating voice, and it surprised him now to find how hoarse and strained it had become.

"How—how did you find us here?" she gasped.

Brixey allowed himself to wink, and to smile.

"Ah!" he answered. "In all these affairs, Mrs. Letwige, there's generally some little detail that one goes wrong in. When you went off last night, you left your green purse on your dressing-table!"

"I found it there. I was in your place within a few minutes of your leaving. I saw your purse, opened it, and read the address of this hotel on the bit of paper. I saw Letwige come back and fetch the purse. And so—there you are!"

The frightened eyes were restless by that time, now glancing at the door, now at the window, outside which stood Matsey and the policeman. They came back to Brixey.

"What are you going to do?" asked their owner.

"Ask you a few questions," replied Brixey promptly. "You'll be wise if you answer them. You're in a nice hole, you know. Everything's known—all about my uncle, your late prisoner, all about Letwige's theft of the securities from Mr. Semmerby and from the bank—all; and the police and detectives are hot on the job, I assure you! Now, tell me, where is your father?"

"You want to give us away?" she muttered sullenly.

"On the contrary, I want to be a bit of use to you," retorted Brixey. "I can get you out of this if you tell me the truth."

"He's off to the west of England, where he belongs," she whispered.

"With plenty of money from Letwige in his pocket, no doubt," said Brixey. "Now, then, you are Mrs. Letwige, aren't you?"

"We were married when I was at the milliner's place in the West End," she answered. "Only we kept it secret. Nobody but father knows."

"Well, I'm sorry for you," said Brixey, "but you've got to face stern facts, Mrs. Letwige! Your husband's just been arrested; so has Mesham."

"Oh," she broke out. "It was that damned Mesham put him up to it! It's all been Mesham! He planned it all about Mr. Linthwaite."

"Keep cool!" whispered Brixey. "It's the only thing. I'm the only person that can help you. And I will, if you'll be sensible. Now, then, you've got all those stolen papers, and so on, in that case, haven't you! I thought so! And you don't want me to call on those two outside? Very well—hand the case over to me, and the key!"

Five minutes later, Brixey, having hastily gone through the contents of the despatch-case, put it securely under his arm and got up.

"Now, do as I tell you," he said. "Keep quiet here. I'll come back and see you before noon. We'll fix it that you yourself didn't know what these two were after. And we'll try to get the principal blame shoved on to Mesham. Now, I'm going to the police station where they've taken your husband."

He went away without another word, silently drew the policeman aside and handed him a sovereign and bestowed a solemn wink upon him, and then beckoned Matsey to follow him down the square.

"Hit it in one, my lad!" he whispered, tapping the despatch-case. "Here's the swag—complete!"

CHAPTER XXXV

THE UNWISHED-FOR PAST

THAT Mrs. Byfield was either unusually excited or was strung up to a pitch whereat nothing could strike her as unusual was immediately evident to the two men of law.

She showed no surprise at seeing either as they advanced to meet her, and her words were addressed, not to them, but to Georgina, who just then came along the hall to meet her.

"Where is Fanshawe?" she asked. "You got my telegram?"

"Gone down to the Safe Deposit," answered Georgina. "He'll be back presently."

Mrs. Byfield turned, then looked inquiringly at Semmerby.

"You're surprised to see us here!" he said.

"No," she answered. "I'm surprised at nothing just now! And here or at Selchester, it doesn't matter. We were going back by the afternoon train to see you. This gentleman was coming with me."

"Your son," said Semmerby, "has been asking what all this is about. I'm inclined to ask the same, Mrs. Byfield."

Mrs. Byfield turned to Georgina and pointed to the office.

"Ask them to show us into a private room, somewhere," she said. "I'll tell you everything in a few minutes," she continued, glancing at Semmerby. "Mr. Linthwaite there knows some of it. And I shall be glad to tell it to you while Fanshawe's out of the way. I shall have to tell him of—things—later, when we're alone."

She said no more until a waiter had shown them into a private parlour. Then she indicated the elderly clergyman.

"Mr. Winslow, vicar of Mingham Parva, in Berkshire," she said. "I went to see him yesterday about this. He's been kind enough to get me some information I wanted and to come back with me to see you, Mr. Semmerby."

"The truth is," she continued, as they all sat down round a table, "I've kept back certain things until—well, until they can't be kept back any longer. I told Georgina something of the truth on Sunday night, and she advised me to clear matters up, once for all. And so I had to

come up to town, and to find Mr. Winslow—and now, as you're here, I will tell, and have done with it.

"Mr. Linthwaite," she exclaimed, after a pause during which she seemed to be reflecting, "you know that before ever I married Martin Byfield, I'd been married to Cradock Melsome, a relative of yours."

"Sorry to say I do, Mrs. Byfield," replied Linthwaite. "I am sorry for two reasons—first, I know Cradock to have been a bad lot, always; second, I regret to say he's alive."

He was watching her keenly as he said the last words, and he felt, rather than saw, that Semmerby, too, was waiting for the effect of this blunt announcement. But Mrs. Byfield showed no surprise. Instead, she nodded her head in acquiescence.

"So do I know he's alive," she answered. "He was brought to see me last week—twice—by his brother Charles, who's been living at Selchester for two years—on me! You know him, Mr. Semmerby. But he calls himself Christopher Mesham in Selchester."

The two solicitors exchanged glances.

"You know the effect of this, Mrs. Byfield," said Semmerby, after a pause. "It means that you were never legally married to Martin Byfield."

But Mrs. Byfield shook her head.

"It would mean that," she replied, "if I hadn't known something all these years, something that I never told to anybody but Martin Byfield. I've kept it quiet because I've a horror of raking things up, and I didn't want Fanshawe to know, and I hoped to end my days peaceably in Selchester without talk or gossip, which is impossible now, and because I'm easily got round, and lots of reasons."

"But it's got to come out. The truth is, I never was married to Cradock Melsome! Legally, anyway."

"Eh?" said Linthwaite. "You never were married to Cradock? But——"

Mrs. Byfield leaned over the table, tapping it with an outstretched finger. She looked from Linthwaite to Semmerby, from Semmerby to Linthwaite.

"I went through a form of marriage with Cradock Melsome here in London," she answered. "And I believed it was all right. But it wasn't. Cradock Melsome, Mr. Linthwaite—you were Mr. John Herbert in those days—was already married! This gentleman married him, and his real wife is alive!"

The two solicitors, after a long stare at Mrs. Byfield, turned to the old clergyman.

"Can you speak as to this, sir?" asked Linthwaite.

"I can speak as to what I know," replied Mr. Winslow. "Mrs. Byfield has given me the date of her marriage to Cradock Melsome, which took place, as she says, here in London."

"Now, two years before that I married Cradock Melsome to a parishioner of my own, who still lives in my parish. I have been vicar of Mingham Parva for forty-one years."

"There's proof of this?" asked Linthwaite.

"I made a copy of the entry from my marriage registers last night for Mrs. Byfield," answered Mr. Winslow. "And as I say, the woman is alive. She can be produced."

"Who is she? Who was she?" demanded Semmerby.

"A young woman of my parish who, very unfortunately for herself, had a little money," answered the vicar. "Cradock Melsome used to come down there fishing. He persuaded her to marry him. The money, I believe, was soon gone. Then he disappeared."

"I had a little money, too," remarked Mrs. Byfield. "That soon went. But in my case it was I who disappeared. I'd had enough."

Semmerby looked at his fellow-solicitor as if asking for advice. And Linthwaite nodded at Mrs. Byfield.

"I've never heard anything that gave me much more satisfaction than this," he said heartily. "But you'd better tell us all about it, Mrs. Byfield, and about recent events."

"Especially the recent events of which I seem to have been left in utter ignorance, family solicitor though I am!" muttered Semmerby. "You should have trusted me, my good lady!"

"I didn't know what to do. I hoped the past would never be raked up," replied Mrs. Byfield. "But I'll tell you everything. As I said just now, I had a little money—eight or nine hundred pounds—when I was twenty-one. I got to know Cradock Melsome. He persuaded me to marry him.

"We hadn't been married a week before I knew what I'd married—a thoroughly worthless, idle scoundrel! And he'd got my money! I hadn't been married six months before the other woman found us out—or found me out, for he was always away at race meetings, leaving me to support myself.

"She told me what Mr. Winslow has told you of just now. I asked her what she was going to do, and she said that all she wanted was to go back to her village and be left alone. She went, and I went, too—to the other end of the world! I never wanted to see or hear of Cradock Melsome again, I assure you.

"I just went off, there and then, and very soon afterwards I got a post as stewardess in a New Zealand steamer. When I got to Wellington, I stopped there for some years. Then I came back to Europe, again as a stewardess, and I was some little time at Marseilles, in one of the hotels there, and after that I was manageress of an English tea-room at Nice.

"There I met Martin Byfield. He wanted to marry me, and I told him all that I've told you. Well, we were married, and there's no doubt about that, Mr. Semmerby!"

"I'm unfeignedly glad to hear it!" exclaimed the old solicitor. "But I'm absolutely puzzled why you never told me of all this."

"I didn't want to tell anybody," said Mrs. Byfield. "I hated to think of the past, and I didn't want my son to know—I hoped he never would know. I believed it was all dead and buried. I fancied I should never see or hear of Cradock Melsome again."

"But you have!" observed Linthwaite. "And that's what I want to know about. What are the recent events, now?"

"They began two years ago," replied Mrs. Byfield. "Not very long after my husband died, I went over to Brighton one day, and when I was leaving, I saw a man in the station there whom I thought I'd seen before, though I couldn't think where.

"When I'd got in the train, I remembered—he was Charles Melsome,

Cradock's brother. It turned me faint and sick to think of. And when I got out at Selchester he came up to me. What was I to do? He made me meet him next day. He threatened to let everything out.

"So I began to give him money, and I've been giving him money ever since—seven or eight hundred pounds a year. So that he could keep an eye on me, he came and lived in the town and called himself Mesham. That's the truth about him—as bad if not worse than his brother he is!"

"About the brother, now?" asked Semmerby. "You say you saw him last week?"

"When I met Mr. Linthwaite—whom I'd known as Mr. Herbert, when I was married, or believed myself married, to Cradock—last Tuesday," answered Mrs. Byfield, "I made up my mind I'd tell him all about this. But Mesham, as we call him, came along. He and Mr. Linthwaite went off together.

"And it was the night after that, when Fanshawe was out, that Mesham brought Cradock to the house, by the garden gate. They caught me alone—nobody knew they were there. And there they had me, trapped! What was more, they came again the next night, in the same way.

"Cradock swore that the marriage to the girl at Mingham Parva was not a proper one—he'd all sorts of explanations about it—and they were both so certain that I didn't know what to do, or think. They threatened me with exposure if I didn't——"

"If you didn't buy their silence!" interrupted Semmerby sardonically. "Now we're getting at it. In short, Mrs. Byfield, you consented to be blackmailed, eh?"

"What was I to do?" exclaimed Mrs. Byfield. "They both swore that I was legally married to Cradock! And I so dreaded what they could do that I promised to buy their silence. I dare say——"

"To what extent were you going?" demanded Semmerby.

"I promised to give them a certain sum of money—to-day," admitted Mrs. Byfield. "Of course, it would have been my money—not Fanshawe's. But——"

"That's why Mesham looked so sold when he saw Mrs. Byfield leave for London yesterday morning!" exclaimed Semmerby, with a glance at Linthwaite. "Well, they haven't got the money. But now, there's this Letwige's affair, Mrs. Byfield."

But before he could say more the door opened, and a waiter showed in a quiet and demure-looking person who carried in his right hand, evidently with great care, a brown leather dispatch-case.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE STOLEN MARCH

BRIXEY was still cock-a-hoop when he and Matsey rounded the corner into Byward Street. Everything had gone well. His plan of campaign was being carried out precisely as he had wished it to be. Nothing could have been more satisfactory, he thought; but in the midst of these triumphant reflections he came to a sudden halt.

One glance along the street showed him that something either had gone wrong, or was in process of going wrong. According to his plans, Mesham and Letwige ought by that time to have been in the sure and safe custody of the police.

He had already pictured them at the police station, bewildered, confounded, very angry, endeavouring, perhaps, to banter, trying, no doubt, to explain themselves to unsympathetic and incredulous ears.

But instead of that there they were, some thirty yards away along the pavement, talking in quite easy fashion to the two detectives and Gaffkin—they were even laughing. Brixey's sharp eyes saw that the detectives appeared to be puzzled, that Gaffkin was looking doubtful.

Something unexpected was certainly in the air. And he was glad that all five men were so absorbed in their conversation that they saw neither himself nor Matsey.

To slip the dispatch-case behind his back and to draw his companion round the corner again was to Brixey the work of a second. He glanced about him, saw a disengaged taxicab, and signalled to its driver, who caught the beckoning movement, started his engine, and came quickly to the edge of the kerb.

"Matsey!" muttered Brixey. "You're a dependable chap, and I'm going to entrust the swag to you! Take this dispatch-case straight to the Grosvenor Hotel. Ask for Mr. Semmerby and Mr. Linthwaite—give it into their hands, and to nobody else.

"If they haven't arrived, wait for them! And tell them that I've sent you with this, that they're to keep a tight hold on it till I come, and that I'm following you at once. Now be off!"

The taxicab sped away round the corner, westward, and when Brixey followed it at a leisurely pace, was already far past the group in which he was interested. Its members were strolling towards him, still talking, the detectives appearing puzzled, the two confederates nonchalant. As for Gaffkin, he walked alongside, apparently in moody thought.

Thereupon Brixey drew out his cigarette-case and ostentatiously proceeded to smoke. That gave him the opportunity to pause in the middle of the sidewalk, and to let the others approach more closely.

The elder detective was the first to see him. He immediately quickened his pace.

"Here's Mr. Brixey himself!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Brixey——"

"What the devil have we to do with any Mr. Brixey?" demanded Mesham. "We've told you what you wanted to know, and there's an end of it! You go about your business, and leave us to ours!"

Brixey threw away his match and turned on the group.

"Businesses are apt to get a bit intermixed," he remarked. "What stage has this got to?"

The elder detective pointed at Letwige.

"He admits he's John Letwige, Mr. Semmerby's clerk from Selchester," he said. "He admits, too, that he's in possession of Mrs. Byfield's securities—certain of them, at any rate."

"He does, eh?" asked Brixey, eyeing Letwige closely. "Candid, to be sure!"

"Yes—but," continued the detective, "he also says he's every right

to be in possession of them. He's got a power of attorney from her! We've seen it, just now."

Mesham laughed sneeringly, and Letwige's lips curled a little at the corners. Both were watching Brixey, but they saw nothing on his face beyond an almost careless indifference.

"Ah!" he said. "Mr. Letwige has a power of attorney from Mrs. Byfield, has he? And he's shown it to you? Perhaps Mr. Letwige will show it to me?"

Letwige lifted a hand towards his breast pocket, but Mesham shook his head and growled.

"Don't do anything of the sort!" he said. "What's he got to do with it? What right has he to interfere? Come on!"

But Letwige glanced at the detectives, and, disregarding Mesham's advice, drew out a big envelope and took from it a formal-looking document which he held up in front of Brixey's eyes.

"No objection to his seeing it," remarked Letwige. "It's all in order."

Brixey glanced at the signature and turned away.

"Much obliged to you," he said. "But there are two or three things I might say as to that. However, I'm only going to say one of them. How do we know that signature isn't a forgery?"

Letwige put the document back in his pocket with a scornful laugh, but Brixey noticed that his hand was trembling.

"My own belief," he continued, looking at the detectives, "is that it is a forgery. And probably that chap there," he went on, turning and indicating Mesham, "is the forger! He calls himself Christopher Mesham—his real name is Charles Melsome. And some time ago he was convicted of forgery, and he got five years!"

Mesham's fresh-coloured cheeks grew purple, and he made a step towards his accuser and lifted his stick.

"None of that!" exclaimed the detective, thrusting himself between the two men. "No violence! Here, didn't you say, Mr. Brixey, that Mrs. Byfield and Mr. Semmerby are in town? Yes? Then do you two come along and see them and show that document, and we'll soon know——"

"No!" said Brixey suddenly. "Let them go on—where they like!"

He himself stood aside, with a quiet wink at his helpers, and they, after a second's hesitation, moved from in front of the two confederates and let them pass. Letwige and Mesham passed on, slowly, muttering to each other.

"What's this mean?" asked the elder detective. "What's your game now, Mr. Brixey?"

"Wait!" answered Brixey. "You'll see." He glanced round, and seeing two policemen talking together a little way off, pointed them out to the younger detective. "Look here," he said. "You'll want help in a few minutes. Go and get those chaps, and another, if you see one handy, to stroll up to the hotel there—that's where Mesham and Letwige are going—and they'll be out of it again pretty quick, too!"

"You know what they're gone back for? Those securities? Well, they won't find 'em. The fact is, I've got 'em!"

"You!" exclaimed all three. "Got 'em—all?"

"I got the whole boiling out of Letwige's wife," answered Brixey. "You didn't notice a taxicab that ran up the street just now? Matsey was in it, sticking to a dispatch-case in which are all the securities carried off from Selchester! He's taking it to the Grosvenor Hotel, to Mr. Semmerby. And I'm following as soon as we've seen what we're about to see. Come on!"

He led the way towards the front of the hotel, while the younger detective summoned the policemen, who, in their turn, signalled to the constable to whom Brixey had recently given a sovereign. From various points the posse of avengers concentrated on Wolmark's, and watched.

There was not much time wasted in waiting. Through the open door of the hotel Mesham suddenly rushed, shouting and gesticulating. He had reached the steps, and was staring wildly about him, when Letwige, too, rushed out, only to seize his confederate by the arm in evident expostulation.

He appeared to be entreating Mesham to keep cool, and in the midst of his entreaties he caught sight of the watching group, dropped Mesham's arm, and fled within the house again.

Brixey turned to the detectives with a laugh.

"They've found all the eggs stolen from the nest!" he said. "Now, then, you fellows, go and take both of 'em! I'm off to the Grosvenor. Telephone me there when you've got 'em under lock and key, and we'll come down."

"But, look here," he added, taking the elder detective aside, "leave the woman alone. I promised her! Stick to Letwige and Melsome."

He hurried away then and found a taxicab and followed Matsey to the Grosvenor Hotel, where he burst in on an astonished group, in the midst of which lay the dispatch-case. Without a word, he drew a key from his pocket, and laying it before Mrs. Byfield, pushed the dispatch-case towards her.

"What's all this, young man?" demanded Semmerby.

Brixey got his breath, which he had lost in his hurry along the corridors.

"Mrs. Byfield," he said, "one question. Have you ever given that man Letwige a power of attorney to deal with your affairs and property? Think!"

Mrs. Byfield turned wonderingly on Semmerby, and looked from him to her questioner, still more wonderingly.

"Power of attorney—to Letwige?" she exclaimed. "Never!"

"Then open that case, and you'll find all your securities there—safe!" said Brixey. "So far as I can judge," he added, turning to Semmerby, "everything's there! I rescued 'em by a trick. It came off. So, Mrs. Byfield, you're not a penny the worse, as it turns out."

But Mrs. Byfield was staring helplessly at her solicitor.

"My securities?" she faltered. "What does he mean? Rescued? What is it? What has happened?"

Brixey turned on Semmerby.

"Do you mean to say she doesn't know?" he exclaimed.

Semmerby gave him a look.

"She knows nothing yet!" he whispered. "She's been telling us a good deal. You're sure all's safe?"

"Certain!" replied Brixey.

"And the men?" demanded Semmerby.

"In the hands of the police," said Brixey. "They'll be telephoning presently. We shall have to go down there—at least you and my uncle will."

He turned away from the old solicitor and touched Georgina on the shoulder, at the same time motioning her towards the door. "Come out here!" he murmured. "I want to speak to you."

Outside in the corridor Brixey led Georgina away to a retired and quiet corner which he had noticed as he came along.

"Tell me at once," he said as he signed to her to sit down behind a convenient screen, "what did Semmerby mean just now when he said that Mrs. Byfield had been telling a good deal? What has she told?"

"Listen, I want to know particularly—is that theory of Gaffkin's, which we put before you on Sunday, right? Be plain. Does that Byfield property really belong to you?"

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE UNEXPECTED WINDFALL

GEORGINA, already considerably mystified by Brixey's strange proceedings, and wondering why he had conducted her to a retired nook in a dimly lighted corridor, wherein, thanks to screens and curtains, they were completely shut off from the gaze of mortal eye, turned on him with a glance of astonishment.

"Why do you ask that, Mr. Brixey?" she exclaimed. "To me—how could it belong to me?"

"Oh, rot!" retorted Brixey. "Don't let's stand on ceremony. I mean, don't let's quibble about terms, you know. I feel this is a great occasion."

"There are all sorts of momentous events in the atmosphere. You and I, we're momentous events, or personalities, or—or something! Perhaps I'm not quite clear——"

"Anything but!" said Georgina decisively.

Brixey made a desperate endeavour.

"Look here!" he said. "Let's try to be—I mean, let me try to be. You've been with these people ever since Sunday night, and when I came in, just now, I saw you were all in the thick of revelations."

"Has it come out that Mrs. Byfield was never legally married to Martin Byfield? That's what I want to know. I'm on pins and needles to know it!"

"Then it has not come out!" answered Georgina, with even more decision. "What has come out, undoubtedly, is that she was never legally married to that man Cradock Melsome. Therefore, she was legally married to my uncle Martin."

"Fact?" asked Brixey.

"That's what she brought that old clergyman here for," replied Georgina.

"Then the Byfield money, most of which I've just rescued from a

couple of impudent thieves, is really hers and Fanshawe's!" demanded Brixey.

"I don't think I'm wrong in saying—precisely so!" answered Georgina. Brixey heaved a deep sigh—unmistakably a sigh of immense relief.

"Hooray!" he said. "Delighted to hear it! Best news I've heard for a week!"

Georgina turned a little in her seat and looked steadily at him.

"Why?" she exclaimed. "What on earth have you got to do with it? Or, rather, what on earth has it got to do with you? Aren't you a bit queer, Mr. Brixey?"

"I am a queer sort!" assented Brixey. "Odd, perhaps—I always was. But, the fact is, I—I wanted to speak to you."

"You are doing," remarked Georgina.

"To you—you!" continued Brixey, emphasising the personal pronoun. "That's why I asked what I did just now. You see, I—the fact is, I have strong views on things in general."

"Yes?" said Georgina.

"On most things," asserted Brixey. "I—you must understand that I am by no means conventional. I neither do nor say things that other people say or do, usually!"

"For instance——?" suggested Georgina.

"Yes, quite right," said Brixey. "I—you see, I have very queer ideas about—marriage!"

Georgina turned the full inquiry of her eyes on him.

"Oh!" she said. "Have you?"

"Yes!" declared Brixey. "Always had—at least, I mean, always since I arrived at years of discretion, you know."

"I hope," observed Georgina, looking thoughtfully at a corner of the convenient alcove, "I hope they aren't very queer!"

"Well, perhaps not particularly so," said Brixey. "But they're mine! You see, I always felt that I could never marry a girl, you know, who had a lot of money—couldn't do it!"

"No?" remarked Georgina demurely. "You are, indeed, different from most young men, Mr. Brixey."

"Well, it's a fact!" assented Brixey. "Human nature—we're poor things. Now, can you think of anything more awful than the spectacle of a wife with, say, a hundred thousand pounds, and a husband with five pounds a week? Dreadful!"

"It depends how you look at it," remarked Georgina. "Some men who haven't five shillings a week would be very thankful to get a wife who possessed a hundred thousand pounds!"

"Not men!" exclaimed Brixey. "Don't call 'em men! They aren't men, that sort! Call 'em parasites, leeches—anything but men. A man," he continued, "should be the rock on which the family's built! Those are my ideas."

"Yes?" replied Georgina, somewhat timidly.

"It's not a week since we met—first," observed Brixey. "Isn't that queer?"

"Is it?" asked Georgina.

"Seems so," asserted Brixey. "More like—like a long time, somehow. You came into my room at the *Sentinel*, didn't you?"

"Can't you remember?" inquired Georgina.

"Remember everything!" protested Brixey. "Then we travelled down to Selchester together. I say, look here!"

"Well?" said Georgina.

"Now that this confounded business is wound up," said Brixey, "I've the best part of a longish holiday before me. What do you say if I finish it up at Selchester? I can, you know!"

"Would you really like to?" asked Georgina, still more timidly.

"Rather!" exclaimed Brixey. He looked out of his eye- corners at his companion and ventured to take her hand. "So that you and I could see a bit more of each other, eh?"

Georgina looked hard at the corner of the alcove, but she made no attempt to withdraw the hand which Brixey had possessed himself of. And Brixey proceeded to press it gently.

"In time, you see," he murmured ingratiatingly, "you might come to—to think of me a bit. You see, I——"

Georgina suddenly withdrew the hand and started aside.

"There's Fanshawe!" she whispered.

Brixey looked out into the corridor and saw Fanshawe Byfield hurrying along, piloted by a waiter towards the room in which the conclave still sat.

He was evidently in great haste, and he carried a packet of papers in his hand, and was altogether so engrossed that he looked neither to right nor left. And as he disappeared Brixey repossessed himself of Georgina's fingers.

"What do you say?" he whispered. "Am I to come back to Selchester? Come now, say the word!"

Georgina hesitated and blushed, and Brixey drew her hand nearer.

"Do you really want to?" she said at last.

"Ever since I first met you!" asserted Brixey. "Sure case!"

Georgina looked down.

"To be sure," she remarked, "I have no money. That's just what you want, isn't it?"

"I've plenty!" declared Brixey. "Hang money! But, as it happens, I'm pretty well off in that way, quite apart from my profession. Say I'm to come!"

Georgina waited a full moment.

"I'm awfully in love with you!" whispered Brixey. "By George, it's a fact! Don't you believe it?"

"Ye-es!" admitted Georgina. "I do, if you say so. But——"

Brixey looked round, and encircled Georgina's waist.

"I say," he murmured. "No more skirting round the subject! Look here. Are you going to marry me? And soon?"

Georgina took half a minute to consider, during which Brixey exercised a material pressure on her.

"I wouldn't mind if you're quite certain," she admitted at last.

"Though, really, it's all so——"

At that moment there came the sound of a violently opened door, of hurrying feet, and of Fanshawe's voice, loudly demanding his cousin and Brixey. Those two drew apart and appeared in the corridor, to find Fanshawe gazing in all directions.

"Here, you two!" he called, as he caught sight of them. "Where on earth were you? Come here! I've some news for you. Georgie! By Jove! you never heard such news! Come on!"

He forced them into the room which they had recently quitted, and into the presence of those they had left there, who all gazed at Georgina in a way which betokened something. Georgina's blushes deepened.

"What is it, Fanshawe?" she asked. "What's happened?"

Fanshawe was swelling with importance. He assumed a sort of heavy-father attitude at the head of the table, from which he picked up a thick packet, the seals of which had recently been broken.

"Georgie!" he said solemnly, "you know that you sent me down to that safe deposit place this morning, acting on instructions from the mater? It turns out that my father, some time before his death, placed this packet in a safe which he rented at that place, and left instructions to my mother that I was to fetch it in person on my twenty-first birthday.

"I have carried out those instructions," continued Fanshawe, increasing in youthful solemnity. "Here is the packet! It is endorsed, Georgie, in my father's handwriting. He says this—'I wish my son Fanshawe to make a present of what is here enclosed to his cousin Georgina on the day on which he comes of age.' See?"

"So now, Georgie, your cousin Fanshawe, in accordance with his father's wish, hands this over to you, and—in short, my dear girl, here you are, and jolly glad I am, you know, and—the fact is, it's a little matter of ten thousand pounds!"

Therewith Fanshawe pushed a bulky packet into the hands of the astonished Georgina, who, becoming pale and red by turns, stared from Fanshawe to the smiling and nodding faces of the others and shot a queer glance at Brixey.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, and Brixey knew that the exclamation was meant for none but himself, "I—must I take it?"

Brixey shot in a rapid order which penetrated to Georgina's consciousness long before the chorus of congratulatory protestations struck it.

"You may!" he whispered. "Yes, certainly—now!"

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